

"After the Rain"

Short stories from the SAARC Region



Compiled by: Ayesha Zee Khan



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Fraternity of Literature & Culture

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Sound of Peace and Hope in “After the Rain”

Frank Huzur



Every novelist begins with poetry and short story. Since Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, the beautiful genre of short story has evolved into a fundamental form of literary expression. But not until 1884 it became a permanent feature on the shelf when an American professor of dramatic literature, Brander Mathews, coined the term “Short Story” for emerging genre of narrative fiction. Indian Subcontinent in general and Saarc region in particular boasts of an eternal tradition of fables and parables for thousands of years. However, the modern literature only emerged in its distinct shape and size after the end of colonization in middle of twentieth century. Especially with creation of Pakistan in the aftermath

of partition in 1947, Saadat Hasan Manto became a trail blazer with his classical tales of dark realism. Bapsi Sidwa set the tone with her progressive writing in the "Crow Eater."

Edgar Allan Poe said a short story must have a single mood and every sentence must build towards it. By all means, bouquet of 10 short stories by five promising and emerging story tellers from Pakistan and other Saarc countries in the collection "After the Rain" offers a wide spectrum of emotions. When I read "Life" and "Mischief is my middle name" by Ayesha Zee Khan, one of the freshest voices to emerge from Pakistan English Literature in recent time, I believe, the tales are a classic example of romance, and realism. She is telling the story in realistic prose, where there is great psychological and philosophical depth. In hardship and hope, of a Sunni muslim girl torn between life and death in an Ahmediya home. I feel the despair and anguish of a low born untouchable girl married to an upper caste Hindu groom in Indian society.

In the works of Arbab Daud from Pakistan and Ibrahim Waheed from Maldives, stories like "Jack in the box" , "Banana Patch girl "and "Piece of Peace" there is no fantasy tale. These are progressive stories in spirit and tone. In fact these are good examples of realism. In others there are dark and humorous tales

about human misery. We are living in post Cold War world, where economics dominates emotions. Which is why it becomes all the more challenging for prose and verse artists like Ayesha, Arbab, Ibrahim, Kiran and Pushpa to map out the joy and sorrow, passion and rage, cry for freedom and justice of suffering souls in literature. Peace and hope are twin weapons in imaginations of these short story writers. Not only are they bubbling with boundless optimism but they are also armed with countless fables and parables of real lives cluttered with ambition and aspiration.

More heartening is the bright young age of story tellers who represent the throbbing spirit of the Saarc region where more than 60% population are below 40 years of age. Besides, more and more journals and newspapers should take a cue from Western Publications to publish short stories. In Britain periodicals like "The Strand Magazine", "The Sketch", "Harper's Magazine" , "Story Teller" and "The Atlantic Monthly", "The Saturday Evening Post", "Esquire", "The New Yorker" and "The Bookman" in America have produced stalwarts of the short story genre like Somerset Maugham, P.G. Woodhouse, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mark Twain and William Faulkner. In India, Pakistan and the other Saarc region, not many literary journals could be counted on the fingers. However, literary magazine like "Hans" edited by eminent fiction writer Rajendra

Yadav in India has produced a large number of writers in the past 27 years. Most of them are known for realism; "Hans" was founded by legendary story writer Munshi Premchand in 1936.

I am confident; "After the Rain" is a whiff of fresh air in Literature today. Stories are written in more accessible style and are based on some personal experiences. This is the hallmark of constructing a realistic prose in narrative fiction. In one story of Ayesha, "Mischievous is my middle name" one can see a glimpse of French story teller Guy de Maupassant's easy greasy style, especially illustrated in the prose of his famous work, "L'Inutile Beauté" (The Useless Beauty).

In 14th Century, when Geoffrey Chaucer produced "The Canterbury Tales" it was hailed as the first big attempt to amuse and provoke readers with the genre of short stories. The literary craft suffused with passion and rage, farce and flair, humor and hate reached its zenith with the arrival of translation of "Arabian Nights." After reading the collection, "After the Rain" I have no hesitation quoting the American lady writer known for humor and poignant stories, Lorie Moore, that a short story is a love affair, a novel is a marriage. A short story is a photograph and a novel is a film.

Frank Huzur is a poet, a playwright and author of "Imran Versus Imran: The Untold Story" and a biographical novel, "Imran Khan: The Fighter." His upcoming book is "The Socialist" a definitive biography of Mulayam Singh Yadav. Franks non-fiction is known for touch of drama in the prose to give a surreal feeling of reading a novel. He is also working on a novel, "Soho." Frank divides his time between London-Mumbai-Lucknow and Lahore.

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Arbab Daud

Arbab Daud has a Management degree (MBA) from Philippine Christian University (PCU), Manila and is currently working as a Managing Director at the office of “Kaar Pohan” in Peshawar. Working on different researches in Afghanistan and Pakistan has enabled Arbab to travel and meet different people and learn the art of living life by adjusting to diversity in nature. Arbab’s forte is his writing skills.

Arbab Daud belongs to a family of Writers and Politicians. With the family background stringently based in Pakhtun Nationalist movements, most of the published works of Arbab predominantly emphasize on geo-strategic issues related to Pakthun belt on both the sides of the obnoxious Durand Line.

This is first effort by Arbab Daud to write fiction.

A Night in the Wild

Arbab Daud

“A night in the wild” said Shabir aloud “It is what I always wanted to have since my childhood. You know I have this love for watching horror movies”

“Yea Yea” Asif smilingly said “bright lights, dark alleys, shaking boobs and battering rams” he clicked the filter of his cigarette with his thumb to rid it of the ashes at its tip “what the hell do you like in these superfluous stories”

“Superfluous?” muttered Shabir unconsciously while bulging out his eyeballs from its pockets in astonishment. He cleaned his lips from the iron-filing like pieces of sweet corn cake with his palm “They are just like a lifeline to many humans, and you call them...”

“Okay, Okay I know you love to see these eldritch women wearing strange clothes. Did you see that movie last night on TV ‘Shrinking Bermudas.’ The

way that lady was dressed was disgusting. She wore it like old clichés” Asif commented sarcastically

“Oh come on... didn’t you notice the embroidered lace on her dress” Shabir took a big bite from the corn cake while explaining the situation to Asif “And how interesting was the part where it was told that the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ was originally raped by the King and then she gave birth to twins while she was still asleep, but at last when her child sucks her finger and removes the flax, she wakes up to find that she is mother of two kids”

“Well, where the hell was that seen in the movie of Hollywood?” Asif asks

“Ah” Shabir throws his arms in the air “Fairy tales of the past were often full of macabre and gruesome twists and endings. These days, companies like Disney have sanitized them for a modern audience that is clearly deemed unable to cope, and so we see happy endings everywhere.” He takes another big bite from the cake and starts staring at Asif

“You look so ugly when this big bite of corn cake pops out of your cheek, just swallow it” Asif says with an austere face

“Compliments to the chef, these cakes are finger licking good” Shabir was chewing the cake and talking at the same time and in the process he put his

index finger between his upper lip and the gum holding right side canine tooth to clean the pieces of cake stuck there.

Asif turns his head away and smiles out of despair

“Huntsmen like you are always wild. Isn’t it better to see a horror movie than seeing these cute animals being killed?” Shabir gets quizzical

“So you love the specter of bloodletting on screen than a sport in the wild?”

“You know I hate to be questioned in reply to my query, and you are master of”

“Shhhhhhh... keep quite” a whispered shout came from Asif “An ibex is coming”

Asif takes the position as he climbs the nearby ridge moving with his elbows and knees like a commando. He points the gun at the grazing ibex, holds his breath and is about to shoot when Shabir shouts aloud “NOOOOO”

The ibex runs away

“What the hell. We had been waiting for it for the last two hours.” Asif stares at Shabir with a frowning face.

“Let us get that baby out of the bush. It is stuck there.” Shabir starts running and when they reach the

bush they see a baby ibex stuck therein. They release it while the mother ibex, which was saved by Shabir from Asif's bullet, was waiting afar for the baby.

The baby joins back its mom. Asif thanks his friend for saving a mom from his wrath and promise to abandon the hunting forever. Asif still misses his hunting seasons as he calls his decision a "hysterical abandon" but he is a gentleman and is stuck to his words.

Maybe he is missing his wild rides for the reason that Shabir is about to show him a horror movie "Moving Fingers" this weekend. It is always better to be hunted than go hunting.

Piece of Peace

Arbab Daud

“Life is always harsh” Daud soliloquized “at least to me it always is!!” he slapped his left thigh with his left palm. He stared with a stern face at his cell phone as he held it in his right palm for a while and closed down its flap with a flick of his left index finger and slipped it inside his pocket. “She knows that I can’t live without new underwear” he angrily said “and I can’t leave my job forthwith for with the next month’s salary I would be buying some new underwear.”

Daud was a tall boy with a well built physique. He was a journalist by profession and his boss Ayesha was a forthright and professional lady. She thought Daud’s worst enemy was his laziness. His writing was one of the major attractions for her publication, but he can’t produce results quickly as she wanted. She would call him “Lazy Elegance,” however; Daud loved the saying from Bern Williams “I love the word ‘indolence.’ It makes my laziness seem classy.”

Any investigative assignment given to Daud would be replied with the saying "that we can do it later; there are other important things to be written about." Daud never got the answer from Ayesha for the question "why can't we ever rest before we get tired?" and to any work with a short deadline he can always ask "if we do all the things today, then what would be left for tomorrow?" In short, he always opined that while "others always run for perfection, he prefers convenience."

At last Ayesha was fed up of her do-gooder approach and decided to order Daud to visit Wana (the center of South Waziristan) and get a story regarding the on-ground situation therein. She arranged all the facilities for his travel, stay and security and ordered him through phone to move his butt out as soon as possible.

Daud reached home and started packing for his *tour-de-Wana*. His mother was amazed to see Daud packing and she was in a way happy that her son would go out of home at last. "*Adaky!!* (A pashto word for Mom) Did you know that sometimes your underwear can make life difficult for you?"

"What do you mean" *Adaky* asked in astonishment

“Ayesha gave me an assignment to go to far flung rural area and report on the situation” Daud exasperatedly said.

“Don’t worry, she can’t shed your yoke of laziness with this travel, you would still be sitting in the car during the travel” Adaky said smilingly, as she was quite happy to know that her son would go out of home for something. She controlled her smile, as she didn’t want to let on to Daud that she is happy.

Daud stared back at Adaky’s face “when one thing goes bad with you, all your surroundings start conspiring against you to make you the worst” he kept a stern face “I know you are happy deep inside” and he started smiling.

Adaky and Daud hugged each other with welled up eyes “Take good care of you” Adaky said

“Nope, I can’t do it, you just do it for me through your prayers” Daud said smilingly. “Okay I am getting late. Keep praying for me” He slung his backpack on his shoulder and left home.

The travel in the wild south began for Daud. He was guided by Ayesha to dress like a common man while travelling. He was travelling a Toyota Hiace locally called “Flying Coach.” He was also told to keep his identity as a journalist secret and not to tell it to anyone. The first two hours of travel passed fluently.

A young boy was sitting beside him and asked "What do you do sir?"

"I am a Medical Rep (sales representative in a pharmaceutical company are locally called Medical Rep)" Daud replied

"Oh really. I am a medical rep too" the boy happily said "Which company are you with?"

"Glaxo SmithKline" Daud said

"Which of the products do you promote?"

"Yaar, No one in my seven generations were ever Medical reps" Daud said "Please forgive me"

The boy looked at Daud with a square face. He rolled his eye balls and said "But"

"Please no more questions" Daud requested by pressing both his palms against one another

Suddenly the car was stopped. When Daud looked outside he saw some armed men shouting "All passenger step down"

The looters were checking the pockets of all people and said "Don't worry; we wouldn't take your money." After checking all passengers, he shouted to his chief "All of them have money"

“Brilliant!!” The chief said in a loud voice. He rose from his chair “Dear Passengers, we are quite hospitable people, just look at your right hand side; we have a nice restaurant offering good food. You can go and eat there.” He pointed at the restaurant with his right hand. “The driver should throw all the luggage and bags out of the flying coach and wait for the passengers two kilometers ahead near that ridge.” He ordered

The driver threw all the bags out of the flying coach and moved ahead. Daud said to an old guy standing nearby with a big turban on his head “What is happening?”

“I don’t know” the person answered

“Go!! Eat the food” the chief ordered aloud.

All people started moving towards the restaurant “But I don’t want to eat” Daud said to the man with the gun.

“We have cooked so much food in the restaurant, who will eat it?” he inquired exasperatedly “MOVE or..” He raised the butt of his rifle

“Okay, okay” Daud said “I am going”

When all of them ate in the restaurant and paid a handsome sum of money for the enforced hospitality,

they were asked to take their bags and climb into the nearby standing 'rocket' (a vintage model of Bedford truck) so that they could be dropped near their flying coach standing 2 kilometers away.

Daud prayed with pursed lips "Oh God! Don't let this truck's engine to turn on"

When all people were on board, the chief said "See how hospitable people we are? Won't you just pay some money to the driver as he is helping you reach your vehicle?" he smiled and furthered "make this noble driver happy with your presents so that he can ensure a safe journey for you"

"But why should we pay?" Daud asked in response

"Do you think the ride is for free?" the chief questioned in reply

Suddenly the man with the gun again raised the butt of his rifle and Daud said "I agree to pay"

"Good" the chief said and the passengers started pulling out money from their pockets again. When the payment period was over, the driver sat in the seat and tried to switch on the engine. The engine was not turning on.

"Oh!! I think there is a problem." The driver said apologetically

Daud smiled and looked up towards the sky to thank the God.

“Dear Passenger, can you push the truck so that we can start it?” the driver shouted. All the passengers looked at each other.

“His request is like an order” the person with the gun shouted and suddenly all people climbed down and started pushing the truck. The engine was not starting at all and at last the truck had to be pushed all the way for two kilometers to reach the flying coach. Daud remembered the saying of his grandfather “never pray to God when you are angry”

All sat in the flying coach with a sigh of relief and started moving again. Suddenly a passenger shouted from the back seats, they are again following us in a Land Cruiser jeep. All the head turned back and they shouted to the driver “come on drive fast.”

A wild chase started and at last the land cruiser reached near and held on to the breaks in front of the flying coach. An old person with grey hair climbed down from the jeep along with a guard holding a long gun in hand. The old person was accompanied by the Chief Thief. “Come down you all stupid people” the old guy shouted.

All passengers came out of the flying coach again. "You all are stupid morons" he shouted angrily "I should punish you all"

All passengers looked at each other and Daud said to himself "Oh thee underwear, I shalt forbid renewing thou"

"What did you say" the old guy forced his eyeballs out of his stern face while looking at Daud.

"I was a mute till now sir" Daud said "your holy reverence pulled the words out of my barren throat" he said ironically "shall I prostrate your honored self?"

All the passengers held their breath and the medical rep boy said with pursed lips "you are a lost case. He will kill you now"

Daud realized and felt his heart pounding his ribcage while a silence gripped the venue. The old guy, the guard and chief thief were all staring at Daud.

The silence was broken with an earsplitting roar of laughter by the old guy. With this guy the guard also started laughing. The old guy slapped the Chief Thief on the back and said "Why the hell you all did pay to this stupid boy? He is my son and he worked for 10 years in Middle East and earned money. He came back with money and made this restaurant so that he

can earn money here. But he had a hard luck. The moment he started his restaurant, the security situation went wrong and his restaurant was not earning anything. So he thought of some other ideas"

He pushed his son in the back and said "Say sorry to them all?"

"I am" The chief thief stuttered through his words
"Sorry"

"Now pay them back their money" the father ordered

He paid back the money taken from the passengers. The old guy also said sorry on his son's behalf and let the passengers move ahead.

After a long journey Daud reached Wana and met his host "Zardullah Khan" locally called as "Zarduley Haji." Haji was a very well built man, with almost 6 feet 7 inch height and big bulging pale eyes darkened with *Ranjeh* (Antimony). He had a sharp nose and round shaped face. His beard was 4 to 5 inch long and he had wrapped a good 4 meter long white cloth around his head. He had a very powerful presence and when Daud saw him coming, he could feel the true grace of Pakhtun (or Pashtun) men at display. He was followed by two young boys with same kind of graceful appearance. The names were Tawheed and Tahir. Daud decided to call them "Tee Square (T²)"

Haji guided Daud to his car and Tahir started driving the car towards the north of Wana. They reached a small hill with terraced houses laid out on it. The car started moving upward. We passed by a wall which seemingly was whitewashed and had a "T♥K" written on it. Daud asked Haji that what does this "T♥K" mean and Haji smilingly said "Just guess"

Daud said "Tawheed loves Kashmala" and suddenly Tawheed who was sitting on the front seat of the car near driver stiffened his lips to control his laugh. "Hmmm" then Daud thought for a while and said "how about Tahir loves Kareena" Tawheed and Haji burst into laughter

"Why can't you say Katrina" Tahir said with a serious face

"Oh!! I didn't know that you loved Katrina and not Kareena" Daud said as the car entered a big *Hujra*

Haji looked at Daud and said "it means Taliban loves Killing"

"Really?"

"Don't you think they love it?" Haji inquired and Daud lost his words and started focusing on the *Hujra* (The common male guest place of the village and a place of social gathering for the villagers in rural Pakhtun areas).

It was almost 5000 square feet land with three rooms and a veranda on the right hand end. Some 300 feet away in front of the veranda, there was a big oak tree with a trunk of a 20 feet circumference. There were 5 big sized charpoys placed under the tree. On the right end of the big dusty ground there were few rocket trucks parked. The sun was about to set and its orange circle was half hidden behind the tower on the right end of the Hujra wall.

Daud was taken to the room on the far end of the veranda. The room was good sized and had two charpoys covered with nice locally made mattresses. The mattresses were covered with plain white sheets of cloth. Haji patted Daud on back "This is your room. Take some rest and we will talk later."

"I wanted to talk to people. Would it be possible to meet some people?" Daud asked

"Yes, a lot of people gather every night here and talk. You would see a lot of them" Haji said smilingly

Daud smiled in return as Haji went out of the room followed by Tawheed and Tahir, who swung the door close. Daud opened his arms to the fullest and stretched his neck by looking up towards the roof. He inhaled with his nostrils and exhaled with his mouth and he fell on one charpoy and closed his eyes.

Daud was awakened by some voices. He sat down and he realized that it was dark. He walked out of the room and noticed that some 8 people were sitting on charpoys. They all stood up in the honor of the guest. Zaruduley Haji introduced Daud and said "he is our friend from Peshawar. He is businessman of Goats. He buy goats and sell them in markets." Daud looked up at the face of Haji and smiled. "He is here to look at our breeds of goats here and would suggest to us that how would we be able to use good breed of goats so that we can make good money."

"So he is Doctor of Goats?" a sleek man with a white cap asked

"He will reply you himself" Haji said to the person and he whispered in the ear of Daud "I can't tell anymore lies, I am a Haji"

"Well... I am not doctor" Daud stammered to get time to find words "You... you can say I am engineer of goats"

The gathering roared into laughter. And a guy from the gathering said "good that you are not pilot of goats" and all the people started laughing again.

Daud blushed and was smiling and Haji shouted at people "be polite to the guest.... You rude people!! What would he think of you?"

Daud gestured Haji to stop and Haji stopped throwing his harsh words. Daud sat down on one charpoy and said "let us talk Haji. It is good to have laughter. It enhances your blood circulation" he smiled to the people and said "once a mechanic of goats told me that if you keep on laughing in front of goats they would get fatter with it" and suddenly all the people laughed again with Haji joining them actively.

"Our people are getting killed every day, I think the matter of humans is more necessary to us than goats" Tahir said after the laughing ended.

"Interesting" Daud said "So what do you people think is your biggest problem"

"Our biggest problem is security, we need peace" A white bearded man shouted and he said further "you know when Prophet Ibrahim (AS) was leaving his wife and his infant son Prophet Ismail (AS) in Mecca he prayed to God '.... So fill some hearts among men with love towards them (his wife and son), and (oh God) provide them with fruits so that they may give thanks...' We can see from the above given prayers that asking for filling some hearts with love means peace so that no one can fight them and make problems for them. From this we can see that Peace had been a basic need of every

civilization and it was of extreme significance for every sage all throughout the history of humanity." The white man closed his remarks with a pin drop silence among the participants of the discussion

"So the major problem is lack of peace" Daud asked again

"Yes" Tahir said "Without peace nothing is possible. Development comes to an area if there is peace. Peace is need of not only humans but all the living things" he closed his remarks authoritatively. All the present people nodded in approval

"But what is the genesis of this warlike situation?" Daud asked

"The pagans have attacked our neighboring country. They are the root cause of this insecure environment. Previously, the situation of our areas was very good." A boy with fresh slight beard said. "And they now send drones to kill our people as well. If they go out of this area, the situation would be peaceful again"

"I think it is our own mistake that we are facing this insecure situation" Tahir said "Our people

don't educate their children, we just don't try to make our own area developed and we don't just try to learn things ourselves but we only listen to mullahs so we have made ourselves prone to these bad situations we are facing right now" he looked at the people around and furthered "if we would had been strong, if we would have known that what is good for us and what is not, if we would have understood the threats to our area and tried to solve these issues beforehand, we would had been in totally different situation now."

"So as part of Pakistan, how do you feel. Would our government be able to pull your areas of this crisis?" Daud asked a question

"Are we part of Pakistan?" Zardulley Haji asked in response

"Are you not part of it?" Daud again replied with a question

"Well..." Haji paused for a while "We were ruled by the black law called FCR under British Empire. A godlike person by the name of Political Agent was appointed to ruthlessly rule us. Nothing has changed... we are still ruled by a Political Agent

through that black law of FCR. What good has Pakistan done to us” Haji angrily said “I think we are still ruled by British, the only difference is that before 1947 the Political Agents were of white skin and green eyes and afterwards of black skin and brown eyes. The sole purpose of political agent is to feed the selected few and suppress the masses. Political Agents are here to forbid us from being politically aware” There was a silence in the Hujra because Haji was literally shouting at the close of his remarks.

Tawheed was playing with a small device and he said “My uncle has sent me this MP3 device from Sharja. It can save a lot of songs and let me play a nice song about peace for you people” and started playing with the device again.

Suddenly a loud song started playing “*Munni Badnam Hui, Darling Terey Liyeh*¹” Tawheed shouted “oops!!! Sorry wrong song” and all people started laughing.

“How nice are policemen of India. They dance with songs among people. Our police never do

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoRMObjVhQM>

this” a guy wearing white cap commented on the song and all people started laughing again.

Daud pulled people back to discussion by asking “So how can we pull ourselves out of this situation towards a more peaceful life?”

“I think we need to support the Taliban in this fight” the man with the long white beard said “They are fighting the pagans that have colonial plans for our neighboring country and this way they are fighting a holy jihad. If they succeed in pushing out the colonial powers, we would have a Sharia system and it would be good for all Muslims”

“But what would you say about suicide bomber killing common people in Pakistan?” Tahir posed the question.

“You are young, you don’t know. The people who accept the rule of West and live in areas ruled by pagans are doing wrong thing” the old man said “We will support the people who are trying to bring the rule of Allah on our land. This is the only way to peace. Don’t you need the rule of Allah in your land?”

“Yes, we need the rule of Allah on our land” Haji said while stopping Tahir from saying anything else with a gesture of his right hand. “But we want a Sharia system that is not imposed on us by people who get

funds from outside countries. We need a solution that has its roots in the local people”

“In my opinion, the current insecure situation is because of three parties, The west, Taliban and Religious groups and Pakistan Army. Peace will only come if all these three groups starts working to bring peace” A person in white cap said “otherwise all the efforts would go in vein”

“Well I think the system of Americans and Englishmen is not bad” Tawheed said “I went to Kabul and saw that no one is stopped to go to a mosque, no one is prevented to recite Quran, no one is blocked to practice religion. And you can listen to songs, watch movies and so on. So that system is good and it will bring good peace.” Some young boys sitting next to Tawheed nodded in approval

“Who do you like Tahir? America, Pakistan or Taliban” Daud asked

“None of them” Tahir replied with a smile “I think the only way to peace is non-violence, and we have a nice example to follow in our recent history. Bacha Khan (Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan) is a good example. We should follow his teachings and it would bring us peace in the region. He taught us to be good to our family members, he iterated that we shouldn’t use violence, he asked us to learn and get ourselves

educated, he guided us to be economically stable. If we follow him in true spirit, we can live a very peaceful life. All Pashtuns should follow him and we would be able to rule this world”

“He (Bacha Khan) learned all these lessons from Gandhi, who was a Hindu. Do you want us to follow teachings of a Hindu?” The boy with slight beard asked

“Dear Arshad, please try to read history before you comment on issues like this. The non-violence movement of Pashtuns started much before the introduction of Bacha Khan with Mahatma Gandhi. And again there is a difference between the non-violence movement of Bacha Khan and that of Gandhi jee.”

“Can you explain that difference?” Daud got interested

“Well, Hindu people were already very non-violent people; they rarely fight if you read history carefully. And that was the biggest strength of this nation. So Gandhi jee used this strength to the fullest and bring the British empire to its knees with the help of non-violent movement. In short, Gandhi jee used non-violence as a political mean.”

“Hmm” Daud said “and what of Bacha Khan?”

“Violence was the biggest weakness of Pashtun all throughout the history. Every empire of Pashtuns were not brought down by anyone from outside, but people from the family of the Emperor. Even people say that Mughul King Babar defeated Ibrahim Lodhi, who was a Pashtun, but in reality Ibrahim Lodhi was beaten by his own kinsmen. Bacha Khan saw violence as the biggest enemy of Pashtun and he asked Pashtuns to leave the ways of violence and be non-violent. So, Bacha Khan didn’t use non-violence as a political mean, but as a social reform. And strangely, Gandhi jee was assassinated by Hindu extremist for supporting Muslims and Bacha Khan spent his life being tagged as a supporter of Hindus” Tahir smiled with his closing remarks

“Interesting” Daud called while all people listened to Tahir carefully

“Ah!! I have found the song of *Farhad Darya*, a singer from Afghanistan.” Tawheed joyfully said “It is a nice song on peace. Let us listen to it” and he played the song

We need a piece of Peace people,

We need a piece of love²

² Do listen to this song once

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MzTcRmIWZ0>

Since it was late, all the people dispersed and went to sleep. Daud next morning traveled back to Peshawar and wrote a piece on peace. The write up became an instant success and Ayesha repeated her famous line "there is nothing that you can't do Daud"

Few days later Daud got a call from Zarduley Haji telling him that Tahir had been abducted and killed by Taliban on the charges that he was a spy. Daud lost his words. He remembered the saying from Haji during his trip "In warlike situation, neutrality is your biggest enemy, because if you are neutral, you would be enemy of everyone"

Though Daud was a neutral person and never took side with any party, but from then on he used to call himself "A Capitalist Rightist Nationalist." Oh you Hypocrite.



Ayesha Zee Khan

Ayesha belongs to a literary family, her grandfather and father have both been in the writing field all their lives, and this is where she inherited her part of creativity. Ayesha is a major in Political Science. She started her literary journey from the age of 10 writing Urdu fiction stories for two children's magazines "Bachon ke Duniya" and "Taleem-o-Tarbiyat." Later, she pursued her goals in serious column writing in various English and Urdu Dailies of Pakistan writing mostly on Geo-Politics or Socio/Political problems inland: Being associated with the Pakistan Print media since 2004. She is a co-writer of "The Cornered Rogue" with Sohail Parwaz, her English Anthology of Poetry "Building Bridges" earned her Saarc Young

Poet Literary Award, 2012 by the Foundation of Saarc Writers and Literature.

Ayesha is also a Publisher/Editor/Writer at the MHA Publications which was her grandfather's brainchild and which she revived 18 months ago. Her Blog is available online and can be found from the following link: ayeshazeekhan.blogspot.com/

Mischief is My Middle Name

Ayesha Zee Khan

I woke up suddenly at 2 o'clock in the morning; there was dim light in my room coming from the night light. I stirred a bit in my bed and could feel someone sleeping with me. The breathing was sound, I turned to my right to see who it was, viola! It was my younger brother Munoo covered under the white cotton sheet. Only his left toe was visible in the night light and from where I saw, trust me, it looked like a dead magpie!

"Hmmm, he came in my room to sleep eh," I thought to myself, " He must have felt scared in his room which is quite an excuse for him to land in mine, oh well, he will be sorry later he came here." I chuckled to myself. With a devilish grin on my face I stepped out of my bed and started looking for my slippers.

As I stood, up my stomach growled like a wild wolf having labor pains! "Man, I am starving!" I uttered out loud. Never realized such animal roars could come out of me. I remembered I dozed off on the

brown couch in lounge area while watching my favorite TV show "Little House on the Prairie." I remember Ma saying, "Have food before you sleep girl." I was so engrossed in the program, and Ma disrupting like that, irritably I replied, "I am not hungry." Ma being my mother got furious and roared back, "Well, then starve!" I remember replying "Fine!" just to emphasize food wasn't the most important commodity for me at that time. It was Laura's birthday in the program and I didn't want to miss that for the world. Now, this was last night's conversation but it seemed as if it happened moments ago. I just wished I had taken my meal then. A hungry stomach for me wasn't a good idea, I for one, needed energy to uphold my reputation which was vital for the elemental work of my life.

I proceeded to the dining room to invade on the refrigerator. As I opened the door of fridge I saw previous night's leftover food: Butter, a loaf of bread, eggs, and a bottle of jam, some shami kebabs, a basket of mixed fresh fruit and a carton of milk. Now what was the quickest thing to eat? I chose bread slice with Jam spread on top. Yippee! I ate as if I had been hungry since a month. As each morsel slipped down my throat, it revived the minutest cell in my body, my mind started to function, think and analyze what to do next. I poured a glass of milk, drank that in one go,

took hold of the bar of butter in my hand and walked out of the room after turning off the light.

Teaching Munoo for invading my privacy was hovering on my mind now. I slowly tiptoed to my brother's room, switched on the light and started looking through his most valuable stuff... I fumbled into his latest buy, his prized addidas towel pair of socks. I turned them inside out with the towel side on top I un- wrapped the butter bar and slowly spread the butter as if I was applying a thick layer of it. From heel to toes I made a uniform plaster so that it gave a nice creamy feel to it and was perfectly done. I did the same with its other pair, took the nicely greased socks in my hands with the butter bar, switched off the bedroom light and walked out as quietly as I could.

Upon reaching my room the dim green light from the night light gave a serene effect to the room. I loved my space, my kingdom, my den and my four walls. I walked to Munoo's dead magpie foot and carefully slipped the inside out towel socks first on one foot and then the other one. Covered him with the white cotton sheet and tiptoed to my side of the bed. There was a feeling of gratification that surrounded my being. "Now let's wait for the morning and see what happens" I thought to myself, with a slight grin on my face, I placed myself on the bed in horizontal position.

I was woken up due to a stir in my bed, Munoo was awake and slightly turning his position in the bed. There was morning light in the room; one look at the wall clock told me it was 7:30 am. Munoo took the cover off and sat on the edge of the bed, still scratching his head. I pretended I was asleep while peeping through my lids I wanted to see the next move he made. Strangely, he was totally oblivious that he had socks on his feet he moved himself to the edge of the bed and then put his left foot on the floor and then the right one. He got up, as he took the first step towards the door, his both legs gave way to the slippery base of the socks against the marble floor. He frantically tried to reach out for something to hold his balance but to no avail. His slip was bound to happen (my planning was too good, like I had measured it with my math D for the perfect angle to happen): with both legs skidding side by side Munoo let go of his futile effort to save himself and badly landed on the floor with a humongous sound of thud. "Ahh.....what the hell?" he cried out loud. I took out my head from the sheet and said, "Well, that's a nice morning!" He turned his head towards me in fury; face frowned, the look had the mightiest disgust in it and said, "Yeah, it sure is for YOU!" I chuckled and replied, "Yes, and for the sissy in my room too." He mumbled something & slammed the door on me, left without answering me.

Ma sat with Grandma drinking tea in the garden, both ladies enjoyed their late afternoon tea amongst their flowers and chirping spring birds. There was one thing I loved about these two ladies and that was the way they both discussed everything in the house. Irrespective of the great age difference both had they would talk to find a solution for a problem in family. And the problem would usually be mine to solve. That's what elders do in the house when they have children like me to deal with. Grandma always took my side in front of Ma, that Sana would be fine after she crosses her 14th birthday. Ma always disagreed, she always insisted I would never learn that's how I shall always be; that she would be hearing complaints about me from people all her life. Just then I walked in the conversation to ask Ma for money. "Ma will you give me ten rupees"? "What for Sana?" inquired Ma "The Water chestnut cart is going to come in a short while, I want to buy some for myself." Ma took out a ten rupee note from her wallet and gave it to me. She added rather threateningly, "No mischief Sana." I gave a startled look at her and then at Grandma who was had a small grin on her face while sipping her tea. I answered back with assurance "Now why would I do that Ma? And with whom would I? The donkey, the cart or the air?" I added to tease her. She obviously looked at me in an agitated

manner and replied "with the driver of the cart I meant, spare him please."

I heard the bells from the cart approaching and immediately ran to the gate with money in my left hand. The cart was beautifully decorated by the (owner) driver with water chestnuts; God they looked so yummy, there were red decorative tassels that went all round the cart. Little bells were attached in between the tassels so it gave a sound like that of Santa Claus's sledge approaching. The donkey itself was all decked up too, with a maroon cover on its back; the donkey wore a huge nose ring, with small bells attached to its long ears and a garland of yellow flowers around its neck, an attractive sight for all the children of the neighborhood. I waved at the cart, the driver called Masood saw my signal and slowed his cart and stopped right in front of our gate. I was so excited; I jumped with enthusiasm and almost shrieked loudly "I want ten rupees worth of water chestnuts please." While I said, there came three other customers to the cart and asked the same in different denomination of currency. He ignored me totally, well to be honest just because I was short and with shrieky voice he didn't have to give me a cold shoulder. I gave another long wail of Chestnuts; he looked at me and then carried on again with others. Well, guess what? He gave me no heed, No lift!! Alright, now this meant war!!

I ran back inside the gate and went straight to the kitchen, quickly took out the red chili powder can from the cabinet and literally flew back to the cart. Ma saw me zapping away in lightening speed, I was in from the garden gave me a questioning look. I avoided an eye contact with her and in no time was standing next to the cart again. I repeated my question "Can you please give me water Chestnuts?" only louder this time. Well Masood pretended I never existed, I opened the can of chili powder and went to the donkey, put the can next to its mouth, in haste the animal took a good slurp with its big slimy pink tongue, as soon as it did, and all hell broke loose. It started jumping mad, with shrieking voice of irritation and burning visible from its mouth, juices started to ooze out of its nostrils and eyes. During the jumping humping and thumping the water chestnuts fell on the road everywhere, I gathered the chestnuts stashed them in my left pocket, placed the ten rupee note on the driver's palm that had no clue of what to do in that horrible commotion, with the cart trampling, and men were shouting in complete horror. No one noticed me with the can I rushed back to the house headed straight into the kitchen cabinet, hid my precious weapon and went to the wash basin to rinse off the remains of chilli powder that were left on my hands. Then I walked to my den, my room sat

on my little wooden chair that lay next to the window and started eating my newly bought grocery.

I could hear utter chaos from outside the house; the donkey fled shrieking with the cart to an unknown destination with Masood running behind at his might of 100 meter race after him. "Well that concluded my love for buying the Chestnuts" I thought to myself.

Nobody in the house knew about my donkey escapade, well I knew this because no one talked about it the entire day. All they did talk about was the crazy bugger who agitated the animal, but how it was done that was no one's guess.

The next morning I heard Ma on the phone literally begging someone to come to the house for some prayer. I could only hear her say, "Baba ji I want you to pray in the house so demons go away, and some sense is knocked into my daughter." Daughter! "Now is she calling some Guru for me?" was my astonished reaction. I stayed quiet and walked to Grandma's room. She was comfortably seated on her favorite couch knitting gloves for my brother for the coming winters. I sat near her feet and started saying "Dadi, do you know Ma hates me." She laughed so loud I moved a few inches up in the air with surprise. "Why are you laughing Dadi?" She gave me a loving look and replied while doing her knit and pearl stitches, "No she doesn't hate you sweetheart, she is just

convinced that yesterday the donkey ran off the street because of you." Well, so much for the secret! "Dadi the animal didn't run because of me, it ran due to the chili powder" I answered honestly. She gave me a stunned look and said "what?" I said, "If you remember Ma said do not harm the driver, I obeyed Ma and only made the animal lick the powder, Ma never mentioned the donkey." Grandma left her knitting needles and knelt down whispering in my ear, "this is a secret now, don't say it to anyone in the house alright." She patted on my shoulder and said "Sweetheart do you imagine how much pain that would have caused the poor animal?" I was sorry now; with tears in my eyes I replied "Hell, no Dadi, it never crossed my mind." With her smooth strokes on my back I could feel warmth in my heart numbness in my ears and throbbing in my head with that I started to cry, she comforted me gave me a hug and wipes my tears off. "Promise me you will never hurt nobody like this again." I hugged her and assured her that I feel guilty and remorse for the poor animal. How could I have been so cruel and selfish? I wondered how it must have felt for the poor donkey, if it had any water to cool those burning buds in the mouth.

That afternoon, an old man of about the age of hundred something (well that's what he looked like), long white beard in white kurta shalwar entered the lounge area where we all sat. Ma greeted him as if he

was some star off the sky, a notable in the galaxy of many shimmering ones, his coming she had caught with some rope and net. Ma sat very timidly in front of him with shoulders drooping, head down, and hands clasped on her lap. He said in an authoritative manner, "I have calculated everything in my diary your house Mrs. Khan is under a spell, which is why everything seems tipsy when it happens." Wow! He was a genius! I was really fascinated by him. He started whispering reciting in Arabic some lines probably from the Holy Quran. Ma signaled Munoo to leave the room, Grandma sat next to me and Ma on the walnut rocking chair. The old man was sitting next to the table phone. Ma silently got up and left for the kitchen to bring maybe fruits for him. The old man ordered me to take off my hair clasp that held my hair in a pony tail. I got up obediently and quietly handed him. He blew his breath on the plastic clasp which was quite strange for me. "What the heck" I thought to myself, "He put his germs on my hair clasp, oh dear I will have to boil it in the pot for good twenty minutes before I use it again." I asked Baba ji, "do you want my hair pins too, they are nice and black?" He gave me a dirty look and put the hair clasp on his lap. The phone rang and he announced to Grandma "this call is for me." He started talking on the phone loudly with some man called Hanif. This was very strange for me. He completely forgot why

he had come to our house he seemed very angry on the caller and his voice grew louder by the second. "Hmmm, he isn't a man of spirit." I thought to myself. I gave one look at Grandma she sat with her head down maybe reciting quietly in her heart. Now this was a perfect timing to do something, my brain had different schemes coming in. Like a flash of lightening, I looked at the old man and smiled, he didn't even notice that, he was looking at the ceiling of the room and talking out loud. I got up from my chair went up to him, took my plastic hair clasp from his lap and made a neat pony tail out of his flowing beard. Then I took off my black hair pins that were still on my head and put two each on either side of the bearded pony tail. I felt so proud of myself for making such a neat hair work something the hair dresser at Ma's salon wouldn't have ever thought about, a natural piece of art for him. Just then Ma walked in with a tray full of fresh juice and honey jar, she looked at me first, and then the pony tail, a loud scream came out of her, like a baby stuck in a dark room. Grandma looked up and saw the view; she covered her uncontrollable laugh with her dupatta stuck in mouth. Baba ji was still fighting on the phone; and as for me I ran out of the room and headed straight for my father's lap.

The Life's Great Challenges

Ayesha Zee Khan

Samira and Jawad got married amidst family, celebration, fun and feast with friends. There was music, dance, and laughter, pictures taken and overall peace in the atmosphere. Bride and groom both looked at each other lovingly, holding hands and with a feeling of accomplished relief. What turmoil it had been the last few years to bring their elders on the consenting reality of their love and commitment. It was a fairy tale for Samira since she had loved Jawad ever since she saw him while she was still in her teen years.

Jawad was her elder brother Tauseef's best friend. He used to visit their house almost four times in a week. Samira started liking him; they had an unusual bond mentally which was recognizable on the very first instance. They used to take out moments for each other, talk about poetry, art, drama as the fields were loved by both. Samira was so in love by now with Jawad and she shyly talked to her mother about it.

“Ami I want to talk to you about something” Samira said a bit hesitant. “Yes my dear, tell me what you want to share with me?” “Is it about your college? Or some friend you want to tell me about?” said her mother calmly. Samira now grew nervous that Ami was not even on the same wave-length as she was how could she share her heart’s desire with her mother? Her hands went cold and her tongue got tied, stammering she replied, “Ami, it’s not what you think....eh...I...j-just want to...to say”, she could feel her throat going dry with nervousness and fear, her mother looked concerned now as to why there was hesitation in her daughters tone. “My dear, what is bothering you?” looking Samira straight in her eyes, Samira could feel cold in spine and suddenly her whole back went all tense. “Ami, I want to say that I have started to like someone to get married to” blurted out Samira. Her mother’s expression changed from concern to total disbelief. Coming this out her daughter was totally unexpected. She remained quiet for a few moments and then replied back, “It’s alright my lovely, and you can tell me everything. I will understand where you are coming from.” Samira drew her breath inside and then gathered some more courage to tell her mother about who it was that she felt was worthy of spending a life time with. “It is someone you know Amaan, he comes here very frequently and you like him also out of all bhai’s

friends.” Her mother gave a confused look and looked totally blank as to who it could be. “It’s Jawad.... Bhai’s friend.” Samira’s mother grew pale; she took a deep breath and seated herself on the nearby sofa.

Sakina, Samira’s mother, was concerned for her daughters liking of a young man who was poles apart from their own background. First and foremost: his religious beliefs were totally different from them; Samira was a Sunni Muslim whereas Jawad belonged to the Ahmediya sect who was not recognized as Muslim at all in Pakistan. Sakina feared that such a union would enrage her family, point fingers from the circle of friends she had and of course bring a bad name to the family and her daughter. On the other hand she also had seen the interaction of her daughter with Jawad, she liked Jawad very much and in her heart of heart she knew he was a perfect match for her daughter.

There was an extreme uproar from the family when they got to know about it. Samira’s father had died when she was 2 years old in a car accident. She was the only sister of two brothers. She and her family were looked after and shadowed by an over protective set of Grandparents from both sides. As Jawad’s family highly opposed the idea of their marriage, the two got married in a private wedding,

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with only the support of Samira's mother. The wedding consisted of only their close friends, thus a small and selected group of people supported such a union.

From day one of their marriage both Jawad and Samira had problems. The day Samira was taken as the newly wedded daughter in law Jawad's mother started throwing insults down her way. She called her all sorts of names starting from "unlucky", "man hunter", to a "family breaker". At first she took all in her stride to cope with the settling down in a new family environment but with the passage of time the insults grew and became unbearable for her. She told Jawad one day, "As much as I try to ignore what your mother says to me Jawad, those words stay in my mind and I think about them later, they hurt me, they give me agony, they pinch my existence and they make me cry". She wiped a tear off her left eye, Jawad listened to her patiently and without saying a word just gave a pat on her back and left for his office. Later on that evening when he returned from his work he sat down with his parents and softly put forward his wife's case in front of them. Instead of listening, the father in law called her and threw a slap across her face accusing of tarnishing a relation with their son. Jawad was taken aback to see such hatred and abuse coming from his parents towards her. He tried to settle down his father who was completely taken over

by rage and his mother who was cursing out loud "She is unlucky, she is the cause of this, may she die soon, oh God she has trapped my son," crying all the while.

Samira too started crying with hurt and fear. She had always considered Jawad's father as her own since she was herself fatherless from a very young age. Jawad's mother started hitting herself on the head and chest, this further upset him and he fell on his mother's feet asking for forgiveness. She told him blatantly and with total confidence, "Jawad if you don't divorce this woman right away I will never speak to you again." His father said that he would die to see Samira another day in their house. Samira and Jawad were hurt and confused to see such reaction coming their way. His father kept saying "Son you have been wasted! You could have been an advantage to an Ahmediya girl, your own kind, and your own people." Terrified to hear this Samira fainted and fell on the floor. Jawad ran to save her from hitting the floor but couldn't make it in time. She fell on the floor with a huge thud, by the time he recovered Samira she had a bump on her forehead and a bruise on her cheek.

The next day Samira could not move from her bed, her legs hurt, her head spun and her back felt as if it had been beaten very bad. She requested Jawad "Jan

please take me to a doctor I feel as if I am totally broken from inside." Jawad gave a nod in affirmative an advice for a proper medicine would help her out of her misery. Jawad held her close to him and kept assuring her she would be alright, he was very embarrassed in front of his wife for the way his parents had behaved towards her. He took her to the doctor's clinic, where she was examined, taken a few tests and prescribed a few medicines. The doctor advised that she was under stress, and not eating enough. A day after Jawad was handed over Samira's blood and Urine report. The blood showed that she was extremely anemic and the urine gave the news that she was pregnant. This was a joy for Jawad to hear; on their way back home, Jawad held Samira's hand and said to her in an emotional tone, "You are the only woman that I have ever loved Samira, no matter how bleak the situation may seem sweetheart I will always stay by your side." Tears fell from Samira's eyes and she felt a relief hearing those comforting words out her husband.

He bought fruits for his wife and took home to feed her, only to be found by his mother again who shouted at him that he only cared for her. The next several months Samira was getting weaker by the day and paler by the face with no proper food to eat and insults getting worse by the day. Jawad only took her once to the lady doctor to get her examined. She

hardly came out of her room ever, insults all the time made her even sicker.

The day of her labor was the most eventful one, Jawad was in his office when she cried out in pain, and she managed to go out of the room but was shouted at to stay inside as she was a curse for the family. She climbed out her window and made way to the gate from there she went to the nearest PCO and called her mother who knew nothing of what was happening in her daughter's life. She pleaded her mother over the phone, "Ami please I am in pain, please take me to the hospital." Sakina got confused and made arrangements her elder brother came to pick her up and rushed towards the hospital. She informed Jawad too on way from her brothers' cell. They barely managed to reach the hospital gate where she was hurled in by the helping staff on the wheel chair. By the time Jawad reached the hospital he was informed he was a proud father of triplets, two girls and one boy, all in good condition. Jawad was thrilled to hear the news. He rushed to Samira first who looked weak and a little unstable, whereas the babies were doing well in the nursery. The doctor advised to keep the mother and the babies in the hospital till they were a little healthier to survive without the assistance of the incubator.

Days went and Jawad never came to meet the babies and his wife in the hospital. The doctors gave Samira a discharge form and told her that she and the babies were healthy enough to leave. She called Jawad but he refused to take her call. She called him again but he never attended his phone, which shocked and bewildered her. She called one of their mutual friends, Fauzia and Shehryar, to enquire what had happened to Jawad and why was he showing this attitude. They both came along to the hospital with a horrific face and literally in tears. Shehryar had an envelope in his hand which he gave Samira to read. When she opened the envelope, it contained a letter from Jawad only written in his handwriting as "I AM SORRY" accompanied by divorce papers. The room spun before Samira and she went white with shock. Fauzia packed Samira's clothes with her mother and helped pick up the babies, they all walked out of the hospital. Samira walked with a heavy heart with tears rolling down her cheeks, all she could think of was how could this have happened to her? Why her? After all the love and support and the three beautiful children she gave him.

With nowhere to reside, no one to help her with her new born babies and with no financial help at all Samira was compelled to return to live with her mother and her Grandparents who were already in a shock to see her with the babies and a divorce paper

in her hand. What would they tell their acquaintances? How would they answer people's questions? Everyone in the house was bewildered by the sudden change. What would become of the babies?

Days and months went with Samira trying to stand up back on her feet, health and strength wise. She decided to get a job with a nearby school and get herself working so that her mind would be busy during the day.

One day she decided to call Jawad, thinking that he might want to patch things up again or want to see his children at least. So Samira dialed each number of his mobile on her phone with nervousness, Jawad received the call "Hello, yes Samira what can I do for you?" He spoke as if he never knew her! Samira gathered all her courage and said, "Jawad I love you and miss you so much. Are you keeping well? Taking meals on time? When will you meet the children"? He was just quiet on the other end, breathing deeply. Samira continued her conversation, "Jawad, we can still patch up, there are days before the last date of our divorce, dont you want to give me and the children a chance in your life"? There was complete silence again from him. Frustrated Samira added, "Sweetheart I am talking to you, the babies are coming out so beautiful they all have your eyes and

they smile like you too.” Jawad took a deep breath and replied like a total stranger, “Samira, your and my relation finished with our divorce, as for the children I don’t want them because they will keep reminding me of you. I suggest you move on in life because I have done so, I got married two days ago with in my family, there is no room for you in my life anymore.” Sobbing Samira replied, “Jawad but you loved me, how could you do this?” He just hung the phone to end the conversation with her. She dialed his mobile number again only to find it switched off completely.

This news landed Samira in a state of shock once again, but the jolt was such that she gained the energy and the will power to move forward in life. Observing the tension across her mother’s face day and night, Samira developed the energy to go to her mother and declare to her “Aman, I know I am your only daughter, and this tragedy has broken you down. Let me tell you that this horrific tragedy will not pull me down, rather now since I am both mother and father of my children I have to be strong to give them a good life”. Sakina had tears in her eyes and she kissed her daughters forehead for being Courageous at a time like this. She prayed to Allah to give strength to her as He has given Samira to take such a wise decision.



Ibrahim Waheed "Ogaru"

It is difficult to fit Ibrahim Waheed "Ogaru" into a particular profession. He usually prefers to call himself a writer artist. However, there is a lot more to him than any one person who might have met him wearing one of his hats would know.

Professionally, Ibrahim Waheed "Ogaru" is an educator. Educated at the American University of Beirut, and later in Cambridge, he specializes in educational assessment and in teaching language. Starting formally three decades ago as a government-employed teacher in the Maldives, he reached the coveted position of Head of the Department of Public Examinations. In the private sector, he continued his commitment to education by being on the core team

of Cyryx Computer Training Center and was the first Rector of Cyryx College.

As a man of languages, Ogaru Waheed is fluent in at least eight foreign languages, has worked as state translator in some high-level assignments and has served his country as a Member of the National Center for Linguistic and Historical Research for more than two decades.

Ogaru Waheed has also served his country in high-powered state positions including the posts of Head of Culture at the Information Ministry and later as Deputy Minister of Finance. Today, he continues to be in state service as Commissioner of Elections.

Mr. Waheed is an accomplished musician, has composed music for a few Maldivian movies, written and performed for various national occasions, and has even served as Judge at the prestigious Voice of Maldives competitions. He is also a skilled artist and painter.

Mr. Waheed is also a skilled orator and has also served as judge at the National Oratory Contests for about a decade. He is also a sought-after TV presenter, has interviewed personages like Arthur C. Clarke, Yasser Arafat, and three Indian Prime Ministers including Shri Rajiv Gandhi for Television

Maldives. Today he continues to host a special awareness program named "Witness With Waheed".

Mr. Waheed is also co-founder of EcoCare, one of the oldest and most influential environmental NGO's in the Maldives and continues to enjoy a strong youth following in that area.

Ogaru Waheed has been a regular contributor to various prestigious weeklies and periodicals in more than one language in more than one country for more than three decades, and is a household name in the Maldives. He has also received the Sahitya Akademi (India) Munshi Premchand Fellowship Award, the FOSWAL SAARC Literary Award. Some of his fiction has been published by the National Library of the Maldives.

Banana Patch Girl

Ibrahim Waheed "Kalaavehi"

When I was a child, I used to start my day sitting on my private chunk of coral under the banana fronds in my little private corner of the yard. The always-wet smells which surrounded the banana shoots as they shot out of the soil somehow comforted me, as if I somehow belonged. And every day, as the light of day slowly took its brush of colors and filled in the surroundings, I could hear all of nature waking up. If I listened carefully, I could hear the rhinoceros beetle larvae wriggling like fat bananas in the vegetable litter that squelched underfoot if I moved. And even if I didn't listen particularly hard, I would hear proud roosters crowing in gleeful cacophony from far and near. And on some days, I would hear Mom shouting for me just before breakfast. Today was no exception. Her exasperated voice came to me over the chickens just beginning to cluck around in the yard, "Now where's that little genie-crazy miscreant! I am sure she has gone out into the banana patch without washing her face! Aishy!!! Where are you?"

For any innocent child on God's own earth, its mothers' sweet voice would normally be the supreme source of comfort and protection. Thus, I would not deny that I took reassurance and a sense belonging from my mother's presence. I even took a certain sense of comfort from Mom's constant shouting at, about, or even for me. But I must also make a dread confession. Sometimes, Mom's voice seemed to envelop me in a suffocating blanket of superfluous warmth which I had always shied away from. I could never explain, even to myself, why.

Not really thinking of an explanation as to why I was in the banana patch, I stepped out into the yard, startling a fat brown hen, her brood of chirping golden-yellow chicks trailing dutifully in her wake. As Mom's voice pulled me out of my dawn refuge into a supposedly more organized world, I heard an angry koel bird reaffirming its territorial stake in our neighbors' breadfruit tree. The smoky aroma of the wood fire starting up in our kitchen heralded breakfast. An aluminum kettle of pre-sweetened black tea would already be on the boil as hot wheat-flour *roshi* and deliciously piquant tuna-coconut *mashuni* would soon be made. Somewhere in a lane nearby, I heard the echoing call of an enterprising hawker trying to sell local viands to the neighbors – smoked fish, lime, fresh chili-peppers, “*Valhoamas, limbo, roa mirus, gannaaneh baa!*”

Like the breakfast *mashuni* eaten by almost every family in the neighborhood, I was expected to conform to a set of standard rules for little, well-brought-up children. Every day in the morning, I was expected to wake up at dawn, attend to my bodily functions, brush my teeth with clean white sand, do my ablutions and perform the *fajr* prayers. Then, I was expected to help Mom sweep the yard and join her in the kitchen. Unfortunately, I had failed in carrying out some of these tasks, my banana patch having summoned me well before dawn. And as soon as Mom saw me, I was reminded of these grave transgressions, "Aishy! There you are! How many times do I have to tell you that little children need to listen to their mothers? Now..."

It was not that I did not love Mom or that I ignored her exhortations to be good. I had always wanted to be good, too. But what had always grated on me was that I had always been treated as an afterthought, an almost unwelcome visitor in a house that wanted just one child in the form of my sister. From ever since I could remember, I had always been compared to my sister Fathimath.

Fathi, as we all called my sister, was just a year older than me. However, when it came to being a model daughter, a model student of the venerable *Edhurudhaitha* which was what we called

our grandmother-like teacher of religious scripts, or even an industrious helper in the family kitchen, Fathi had always been held in front of me as model *par excellence*. And that was a piece of glass which never became a perfect mirror. Perhaps my failure as a following, conforming girl had been the beginning of my seeking greater solace in the peaceful warm of the family banana patch.

Years later, I was once again forced to look into that piece of clear glass which I had always known with happy conviction would never become a mirror. Fathi had just chosen to give up her studies, any ambitions she might have had as an individual, and any claims to individuality, by getting married to a family-procured young man of apparently perfect conventionality. Soon after, it had been my turn to accept my 'fate'. Even though I had sometimes heard of some socially Jekyll-and-Hyde traits my 'fate' had sometimes given reign to, Mom would not hear of those. Thus, my refusal to follow Fathi's example had only one conclusion: I had to go look for my banana patch. However, since our family banana patch had long surrendered its claim to existence in the face of a new high-rise that was to occupy the same physical space, I had to seek a close substitute. I flew the coop and set up home in a little bedsitter as a single, working girl.

Today, as I sit on little balcony, my ornamental 'monkey banana' plant keeping me company in its little plastic tub, I begin to think whether my nonconformity has been worth all the heartache. I still miss Mom's voice, her wood-fire cooking and the beetle lava in the banana patch. Mental pictures of hens rooting around the yard for small insects, the remembered sound of the iron pestle and mortar beating aromatic spices into powder, and the mouth-watering taste of unripe mango dipped into *torihaakuru* fish paste still make me want to go back to a time when.... Wait a minute! When all I had was a patch of bananas to keep me company?

I see in front of me now four hot *roshi* and a small tub of *mashuni* for breakfast, delivered to me before dawn by the local deli. A steaming cup of decaf keeps a bunch of grapes company on a little glass-topped table, waiting to complete the repast. And as I look outside, I see a van driving by with a huge ad on the side. It shouted at me in multicolored letters, "Smoked fish, lime, fresh chili-peppers.... even bananas, delivered right to your doorstep! Call!"

I call for a ripe bunch of local *Sanfaa* bananas.

Cutting a few slices of arecanut for himself, Mohamed stuck them in his mouth, added some tobacco and a clove for that extra zing, and headed for the *lhos* tree in the garden up whose trunk the betel creeper ran in luxuriant green. Clipping a healthy green leaf from the creeper and adding it to his chew, Mohamed noticed that the area round the tree had been cleared of the rubbish that had accumulated there over the last two weeks. Yes, Dhon Hawwa had certainly been there!

Dhon Hawwa was certainly someone worth waiting for, Mohamed told himself. She was one of the most beautiful young women on the island. Unlike most young ladies of her generation, Dhon Hawwa did not waste her nights watching the latest Khans, Kapoors or Kumars out of Bollywood jumping around within the confines of a 21" screen. She cooked and cleaned for her mother, went to night classes to improve her Arabic and sewed beautiful clothes in her spare time. While her contemporaries spent much time at the mirror, engaged in sweet dialogue with Loreste, Dhon Hawwa made do with a healthier, more natural look. While these traits did not make the local Romeos run in endless circles around her, she did attract the attention of some of the more serious, unattached men on the island, including Abdul-Qadir Younes, the Assistant Katheeb.

Abdul-Qadir Younes, nicknamed Manik, was a very serious man indeed. In addition to carrying out the administrative and social duties of the Assistant Katheeb, he ran his own shop. He also owned a fishing *dhoni* and a baththeli which plied between Male' and its home port, carrying goods and passengers. Many believed that he had inherited from his father the talent of the benevolent magical power called *fanditha*. They came to him for help when their chicken suddenly failed to lay. When someone had a particularly opulent bunch of bananas stolen and needed to find out the guilty party, or when a particular fishing rod consistently failed to rendezvous with the plentiful groupers on the reef, they came to him. Manik usually obliged them with certain charms and incantations. Many swore that they worked. Keyolhu Mohamed pooh-poohed the practice.

Manik was attracted to Dhon Hawwa, not because she reminded him of his wife, now two years dead, but because she exuded that sense of responsible efficiency that was vital in someone who had to manage the Younes household. That was what Manik told some of his closest confidantes. The fact that her youthful charms excited him beyond measure remained a secret, known only to his knees, as the appropriate local expression went. That, perhaps, was why he struck up a quarrel with Keyolhu Mohamed

when he found out that Dhon Hawwa had a thing going for the fisherman.

Smiling to himself at the sheer futility of the Assistant Katheeb's plight, Keyolhu Mohamed spiked his chew with a lick of lime off the little finger of his right hand and went out into the road to perform his first duty as a head fisherman — that of serving as a human alarm clock for the rest of his crew.

Mohamed had just turned left on the new Friday mosque when he ran into Manik. Despite the fact that the two men, and the entire island for that matter, knew of the unstated rivalry that existed between them, they had always had the sense to exchange civil words whenever they met. No one knew, or even remembered why, that morning turned out to be the exemption to that well-respected habit. No one recalled who set off whom. All they could recollect was that very nasty insults and threats were exchanged. Both the Assistant Katheeb and Keyolhu Mohamed had to be persuaded to go their separate ways by the Katheeb himself.

Not much later, the whispering started. Kuda Ali the edhuru teacher told his wife that Manik had said that all he had to do get Keyolhu Mohamed out of his way was to point at the latter in a certain way at sunrise and chant a few magic words. Kuda Ali's wife shared this juicy tidbit with her bosom friend Nuzuha in a

highly confidential manner. Nuzuha, who had seen Manik standing on the beach with his friend Numan at sunrise, recalled that there had been a *dhoni* on the horizon at the time. She mentioned this to her grandmother. Grandmother knew that the *dhoni* on the horizon had been Keyolhu Mohamed's 'Maavaru'. The ladies' grapevine soon had it that Abdul-Qadir Younes the Assistant Katheeb had hexed Keyolhu Mohamed in his bid to win Dhon Hawwa's heart, her hand and her charms.

At four in the afternoon, the good vessel 'Maavaru' came home, filled to the gunwales with fresh tuna. As Keyolhu Mohamed jumped ashore with a broad grin on his face, someone warned him about the curse. Spitting a stream of red betel juice at a crow that had got too close, Keyolhu Mohamed laughed heartily and with obvious derision. He then turned to the more serious business of counting out the fish as per tradition. As a young and dynamic person who believed that trolls, goblins and curses lived on the pages of children's storybooks, he paid no more attention to the warning than the crow he had missed.

At five in the evening, when he opened the *malaafaiy* for a fresh chew, Keyolhu Mohamed noticed that Dhon Hawwa had been visiting again. This time, she had even sliced some arecanuts for him. As he put them in his mouth, he noticed that

there was certain bitterness on one of the slices. He attributed it to the pith of the nut. Then, when the pulse began pounding in his head, he told himself that the new tobacco he had purchased last week was really good. He spat out his chew and rinsed out his mouth. Later, when he started having chest pains and blurred vision, he knew what had happened and why. By then, it was too late.

When passers by heard the guttural, almost inhuman, screams emanating from Keyolhu Mohamed's house, they came running. Keyolhu Mohamed lay writhing on the floor of his house, foaming at the mouth. As they carried him away to the Healthy Center, No one noticed the open *malaafaiy* on the swing. By the time they reached the Health Center, he had already breathed his last.

Soon, the grim news and a dire warning spread round the island: No one shall hereafter insult Abdul-Qadir Younes, good friend of the people. No one shall escape his wrath or his powerful *fanditha*!



Kiran Bashir Ahmad

Kiran Bashir Ahmad was born in Karachi, Pakistan. She was educated in Karachi at DHA College for Women and later obtained an MSc in Psychology from the Institute of Professional Psychology, Bahria University. Currently she is working on her PhD dissertation in Clinical Psychology from her alma mater and has been appointed there as a full time Senior Lecturer. Her research interests are related to the social and psycho-diagnostic aspects of clinical, educational and organizational settings. She has also conducted several trainings at a national level for different educational and organizational concerns.

Kiran Bashir Ahmad's creative journey started from her early childhood when her artwork was selected for the cover of the Habitat magazine at the age of

four years and then for an international greeting card published by the Oxford University Press at the age of six years. During her adolescence writing emerged as the primary interest as she started contributing poetry and articles to different magazines and newsletters, eventually becoming a regular contributor for content posted in the Dawn Newspaper.

She was the winner of the All Karachi Original Poetry Writing Competition organized by the English Speaking Union of Pakistan (ESUP) in 1999 and one of the five winners of the All Pakistan I Belong story writing competition in 2004.

Among the literary works she has published recently are several national and international researches on social, psychological and philosophical topics, short stories (the best known of which appeared in *I Belong*, an international collection published by the British Council and *Neither Night Nor Day* – a collection published by HarperCollins in India) and poetry publications in different magazines. She also works on her blog <http://kiranba.wordpress.com> as and when she gets time. Additionally she has also contributed a chapter on *Cultural Connectivity in the SAARC Region*, to the book *The Eight Neighbours – Together We Survive* published by the Foundation of

SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL) presented at the 17th SAARC Summit in Maldives in 2011.

Kiran Bashir Ahmad is the life member of the Pakistan Psychological Association (PPA) and the Pakistan Association of Cognitive Therapists (PACT). She is one of the Executive Members of the Fraternity of Literature and Culture (FOLC), Pakistan.

Shama Book Point

Kiran Bashir Ahmad

A beacon of light on a tilted boat floating upon a stormy sea – the logo glistened in the sunlight. Blinking like an owl, Mubarak Shah nodded once at the painter perched atop his ladder and went inside his shop. A draft of air greeted him and he sat down with a contented sigh on the stool placed before the counter.

“Shah jee, are you sure you don’t want the name painted as well?”

“No, no,” he grunted. *What’s the use and who even cares if it is there?* The thought was best kept silent. It created unnecessary arguments and he hardly had any patience for much conversation these days. He let his blurred vision travel along the length of the shop to the backdoor. He could almost see a young girl trip gaily inside the doorway, her shadow lengthening before her. She would stand still for a moment and then pirouette gracefully on tiptoe while touching most of the books that came in her range. The shelves

There were so many leaders in opposition now that he never bothered to learn their names. It was better here in the dark lanes where fantasies still dwelt. He looked at a fluttering dupatta hanging from the gallery above his head. Sweet memories of Jaipur, his pink city, swarmed into his mind...

"Shah jee, Shah jee..."

"Yes, yes. What is it now?" He dragged himself back reluctantly. *Can't the man let me have one peaceful moment? And he is talking with his brush in his mouth.*

"You have a cushtomer, Shah jee." The painter mumbled through his brush gesturing with his head. Flecks of yellow paint dotted the once clean shelf at the front of the narrow entrance. "All thish will be clean... All clean." He had seen Mubarak Shah's look. More specks flew.

Mubarak Shah chose to ignore him. A scrawny boy leaned over the counter clutching twenty rupees. "Uncle, two maps. Pakistan and World."

He bent down painfully to extract the blank maps from the shelf beneath the counter. Maps of Pakistan were always in demand with the young ones. *Geography lessons they say. I could teach them more about the boundary lines than any teacher of theirs.*

"You have a clean cloth, Shah jee? It's the last chance... if you want I can still..."

"Isn't your work complete yet?" *He is the scab one wants to scratch into nothingness.* Mubarak Shah handed him the dusty cloth that he used to clean the shelves and the books.

"It will be, in a while. Say, Shah sahib, since when are you in this place? It looks as if it will fall down any moment now. What is the need then to have a name on it? Or maybe you can take out a brick of gold from that treasure chest of yours back there and have the whole shop done." He grinned familiarly at him enjoying his own joke.

Mubarak Shah ignored him again. Old it may be and falling to pieces but this was home. It was a part of him now. Every day when he picked up his little lunch box with its usual fare of a thin lentil soup to dip the bread in, he went forth eagerly. On Sundays he felt lost. His daughter was a grown up girl now for whom the only pirouette was the daily routine of life itself. She dutifully followed him to the door but he hardly ever met her eyes. 'Khuda hafiz' he would murmur and take eager steps towards the fresh air outside. She knew he would head out towards the mosque. Any place would be better than home to him and on a Sunday, the sight of his daughter cooking in the kitchen, sewing the neighbours' clothes and then

sweeping the entire house and all without a word of complaint, gave him more than one pang of guilt mixed with anxiety for her future. It was here among the books, his old friends that he felt peace return.

Peace was far from him right now. The grinning painter belonged to another world. The world of lights and sound and all things far removed from his little sphere – the sphere of broken promises, a life that was spiralling headlong into what seemed like nothingness. If he had a choice, if his daughter could have been educated properly, if she could read any of those books she touched, if he had more money, if his wife had not died giving birth to their only son, if that son had not been stillborn. The series of ifs clung to him like the faint memory of a bee sting. Yet his place was here, among the dust and the books. *Friends... my only friends*. He fingered the well worn pages of the ponderous tome. 'Tafseer e Quran', the title read. It would serve to pass the time till Asr prayers and save him from the conversation.

The painter started wrapping up his things. "I'll finish off the cleaning up tomorrow Shah jee, if that is alright with you. See, it's almost 3:00 and the time for the rally is getting close. I'd best be out of here before then. You know what they do to the roads. I won't get transport for miles around here."

"Yes, yes, bhai. You can do it tomorrow." *Anything to have this man out of here!* Finally he would have the shop all to himself. He was still gazing after the painter however, as he wended his way through the traffic. He went outside the shop to have a look at the scene on the road. The rally was going to be held on the adjacent road. It was planned for late evening but already there were fewer cars. The usual array of carts lined up before the footpath had disappeared. It looked as unreal as if someone had shaved off the facial hair off a person who had worn it for years. The street shone in the afternoon sun, swept clean by diligent workers early in the morning. Another thing that was different in the list of things different today.

The explosion hit him like the butt end of a rifle and he reeled from the impact. Seconds later or was it minutes, he coughed as black smoke seared his skin. *But this isn't right, something is wrong, terribly wrong... smoke isn't supposed to burn.* Screams erupted and where there had been organized chaos earlier, there was barefooted frenzy, but not so for him. His world had gone deaf almost as soon as it began. Later they would remember him... much later...

Headlines were being shouted out by hawkers swarming around the traffic lights like bees in a hive. Each one tried to outdo the other and was heard by no one other than the one next to him. Jostling,

stepping on the foot and using every possible means to be the first one to reach the eager hands thrust out from the vehicles, greed fed their each movement and they revelled in its bloodlust. The painter was not educated enough to read a newspaper fluently, even though he did glance at the headlines at times but right now he did not need to hear them or read the entire text to know what it all meant. *Run*. That was the only word of import. Yet more than half the people had been running he half remembered, not away from the scene of the blast but towards it, their faces showing different degrees of concern and eagerness to be the first on the scene. Once he would have been amongst them but now... *Run*. His mind had thrown the word at him at the sound of the blast. He vaguely remembered the sudden flash of light, the blaze, the smoke and the cries of fire and help from the road he had just left behind him. Standing on the footpath on the other side, he was aware of a very brief impulse to check on the old man. *Run!* His mind wouldn't let up. When, where and most importantly how? He walked in a daze. He had seen paint enough in his life but he was new to the blood that snaked paint-like across the grey canvas that had once been a thoroughfare. *Run!* Still the word resounded until it felt as if his very being would implode on the surge of panic ridden impulses. And he ran.

"Sorry, sorry," he muttered as he ran straight into a group of young boys walking along the road.

"Arey bhai, the blast took place one block away from here." "And here you are running like a bomb is coming after you," added the one he had bumped into. They sniggered.

He was still running, his bag with its set of brushes long forgotten on the road, where it had been ripped away in the rush, when they finally caught up with him. It took two men to knock him to the ground and two more to drag him back to the police van that blared sirens throughout the streets as it carried forth its precious load.

Pain. His world had shrunk till it was confined to his dark cell with its distinctive crisscrossing iron bars and then it shrunk further till his body became the only cell he knew and all he prayed for was a swift end to it all. He didn't know if it was night or day. He just wanted the pain to stop. It will stop they had told him if he would tell all. What did he know? Who was he working for? Who was Mubarak Shah working for? What had Mubarak Shah told him about the plan? The set of questions remained the same, only the interrogator changed.

The day he was to be taken to court he got his clothes back. He remembered the last interrogator. A tall,

broad shouldered, deep voiced man with muscular arms – the meeting had left its impact. Cooperate and you will be safe, the message was clear. Then he had been shifted to another cell with a window. He welcomed the sight. A silvery moon shone down on his new world. "Bah! This man doesn't have the liver to hit a fly. You have fewer brains than a flea bitten cur," he overheard him say. "And I am supposed to conjure a dead man's bones out of thin air?" the voice was louder now. "You let the other one get away. No? Then where is he? There I have the media going crazy and the newspapers have my said and unsaid statements plastered all over their front pages!" he swore loudly. "Make sure nothing, absolutely nothing goes wrong tomorrow or he will have my head!"

The black bag was pulled atop his head as soon as he was pushed out of his cell early in the morning. He heard the chants before the van stopped and he knew they were at the court. "Rehmat Gul ...Innocent, Let him go, let him go!" the chanting grew louder as the vehicle slowed down. Once he would be among the crowd, jeering, laughing, chanting as the occasion demanded and now he the painter was here and the real culprit... He still could not bring himself to believe that the silent but obviously senile and gentle bearded old man had set off the bomb while still inside the shop. The past few days in his prison cell however, had made him wonder. The man was so

silent. He had not responded to any of his questions properly and had in fact seemed most eager to go towards the back door. Almost as if he was expecting someone. He had seemed eager to get rid of him too, now that he thought of it. They had asked him to cooperate. *Well cooperate I will. I will tell them all this. May be the old man was set up by someone but they need to know this.* It was too far to determine voices but he was sure that Karmu and Fazlu would be among the ones in the crowd. After all they were his roommates and his only family so to speak here. He had little clue if his family knew or not. His little village in the Northern areas of Pakistan was remote and became inaccessible in the winter months. They had asked him for a phone number, "to inform the family," they said and he had given them everything.

The hearing took less time than he expected. There were eyewitnesses aplenty to testify against him. If he was not the culprit then why was he running away? He had no answer except the one he had already given. Yet, "I am innocent," did not sound as impressive in front of the sombre Judge and his equally serious lawyers as it had when he had spoken to the muscular man in the prison. He was there too. His arms crossed on his chest, listening intently and he was the only one who seemed to support him, though he added at the end that he was not sure. Rehmat Gul couldn't even bring himself to blame him

for that. How could he ever prove otherwise? Fortunately the court was more interested in Mubarak Shah and his missing corpse than Rehmat Gul's warm-blooded being. Arguments and counter arguments rained down. When it seemed like Mubarak Shah's ancestry from across the border, his religiosity and his missing daughter were going to convict him, another flood of comments on again – his religiosity, his migration to Pakistan just after partition, his poor finances and his age freed him from suspicion. The court adjourned until the next week and Rehmat Gul for the first time felt a faint flicker of hope. It was only when he was outside the court that he realized that he had never once mentioned the old man's reluctance to let him paint the name of the book store, in fact he did not even want to tell him the name of the store. Just the logo was painted on the rickety board above the shop. *Strange behaviour*, he had thought back then and even now it seemed odd. He would make it a point to mention that too the next time in court. He little knew then, that the next week would take several weeks and that his little cell would remain his world even after that for a time until a more suitable answer could be found.

Mubarak Shah saw the news of his own fiery death and his daughter's missing status on television. Apparently eyewitness accounts said he had burned

up in his shop. At one time he would have opened his eyes wide, called out to his daughter and smoothed his own beard repeatedly in wonder. Now, though his hand moved over the stubble on his chin out of sheer habit, he only gestured to her. She made her way barefoot to his side, set down the tray of tea on the sideboard and gestured towards the inner room. It meant that she was required urgently by begum sahiba. She must go immediately. The begum sahiba did not like to be kept waiting. He couldn't hear what she usually said to his daughter but he had learnt enough to lip read most of the verbal commands thrown at him from all quarters. The sahib wrote out most of his demands and he was required to destroy them soon after. Not that he would ever dream of disobeying him or even of running away, for where would he run to? Now that sahib had been kind enough to wed Shama to his accounts keeper – a youngish lad and that too without any demand for dowry, he considered himself fortunate to have come across the right person at the right time in his position.

“The impact of the blast landed you right on the pavement, where I found you,” the unknown man had written out for him when he opened his eyes through the pain of his burns and found himself on a clean bed in a bare room. Then the unknown man had brought his daughter to the small flat where he was

allowed to regain his strength over the next couple of weeks. With no contact from the outside world, and under strict orders not to look outside the window or answer the door, the unknown man had become his only connection to the world. The newspaper clippings he brought back with him each time he brought him food and other grocery items, were enough to tell him that going outside right now would be tantamount to suicide. The entire world thought him to be a homicidal, suicidal, and possibly demented old man who was possibly in league with several dangerous organizations. Shama looked questioningly at her photos in the newspaper and whatever the unknown man told her made her cry. He felt frustrated. Often he found her sobbing in corners after the man had brought them their usual supply and it took the remainder of the day to calm her. Soon the tears stopped and a dull look replaced the tears. The fight had gone out of her. Gone too was the freckled, pirouetting girl of yore and a mature woman had taken her place. Some days he felt he barely recognized her.

Sahib came upon them suddenly. "It is unfortunate," he wrote on a paper in front of him. "I come to offer you a way out of your difficulty." The proposition was simple. He and his daughter would serve his wife for the remainder of their lives at his village residence. In return he would provide them with food

and shelter and perhaps, the marriage of his daughter to one of his men. "He must be educated," he had managed to say haltingly, his ears unsure of the sounds he did hear. The sahib had laughed at that and exchanged a look with the unknown man, but he had nodded and Mubarak Shah felt better than he had for several days. Sahib had taken care of their unknown saviour too, handing him a bulging packet of what could only be bank notes. Mubarak Shah had seen him slip it in his hand as he and his daughter entered the luxurious land cruiser which was to take them out of Karachi. He never saw the man again and his identity remained a mystery that he would often shake his head over as he sat down in the dusk sipping tea with his daughter in his little quarter. His daughter now had a home in the village nearby and she went away with her husband every evening after his duties for the day were over. *Not the best match for her but he is educated and we are lucky to be alive and out of jail. Sahib is too kind. And I am a dead man.*

Sometimes in the dead of night he would get restless and pace the length of the corridor outside the servant's quarters. It was then that he would remember the books he had left behind. There was a library here but it had fewer books than his one crammed up shelf had held. His world had been cleaved into two parts; the world before the blast and the one after it. Then he would fall on his knees, his

eyes filling up with tears and curse the man who asked him to keep the briefcase for him in his iron chest in the shop. "I am a journalist, I need to keep these papers here, or they won't let me bring them again. You can check it if you want... no? Well, I or another person will come for it tomorrow evening just before the rally. My name is Shaukat Umar. Here, keep my card. Thank you so much. I will pay you obviously. Will Rs. 1000 suit you?..." Fool that he was, never to check the briefcase closely. He had taken him for an educated person and had taken his word for it that the briefcase contained papers only. He had even taken out the old board of his shop - the sign that read 'Shama Book Point' to keep the briefcase safe. The lure of money had been too great to resist. *Fool, fool, fool!* He had beaten his head with his hands the first time he saw his daughter after the blast and realized that neither he nor she would ever be truly free any longer. He had not been able to educate her and the board he had painted with her name remained in the shop's iron chest – a promise to his own self to get her married to an educated man at least. Now she was married and to an educated man ... and he owned nothing in this world.

The days passed equally slowly for Rehmat Gul. The human rights workers were his only frequent visitors in the cell he inhabited. Karmu and Fazlu had been regular in the beginning but now they said they did

not get time off from work. As the weeks turned into months their visits became less frequent until he found months slipping by without any sign. The fashionably dressed women who visited him now brought him things to eat and had little to say when he asked them how long he would remain in prison. "We are trying," was their only response. Almost a year had passed before he was freed.

Karmu and Fazlu had a new roommate, Afzal. The first week he slept on the floor, the only available cushioning being provided by the *chaddar* he usually draped around his shoulders in the winters. Rehmat Gul, unemployed, suspected terrorist and fresh out of prison, found it harder to resume work and where his easy conversation had won him friends, the looks he got from people he had once worked for, made it hard for him to joke let alone hold a conversation for more than a minute. It was easier to be with strangers. They were curious but not entirely distant. Yet, jobs did not come to him as easily now as they once had. The day Karmu told him he had a paint job for him, he thought he was joking and laughed. Karmu's serious look brought him to his feet. He looked again at Karmu's face closely when they reached Saddar but when they started walking in the familiar direction of Zaibunnissa street, he stopped. It took Karmu one glass of *lassi* and much coaxing to get him on his way.

True to his word, Karmu stayed with him for the remainder of that long day.

“Bhai, which shop is opening here?” He turned round from his perch to find two men looking curiously into the charred remains of the narrow shop.

It was Karmu who answered quietly. “A restaurant”.

“Aha!” One of the men clapped the other on the shoulder. “Apt, very apt,” he nodded his head, twisting his tie knot to make it more comfortable.

“Arey, did I tell you, I was having paratha rolls with Ali and Zeeshan at *Kebabers* just a few blocks away when that bomb went off...” the second man in the striped shirt replied.

“Acha!” the man had taken off his tie now and was fanning his shirt with the collar plucked between his fingers.

“Yeah! We just kept eating. My mother called to tell me the news on television. She’s like that, you know. And you know what? Even Sagheer uncle called me up from America!”

“Haha! Really? Then what did you do?”

“What would I have done bhai? You know me. I told them both that we are in office. End of story. You know how they worry one to death with their

warnings. We know the situation on the road. There they are sitting in the house and worrying. These media people..." he shook his head as he clapped the other on the back and they started walking away. "Actually we had come for the rally, and that never happened... That must've been their plan..." his voice trailed away.

Karmu looked at his friend but his face was a blank. He was busy painting. As Karmu looked, the logo on the board above the shop slowly disappeared under the paint until nothing could be seen of either the boat or the stormy sea beneath it. In black letters the words 'Farooq Tikka Joint' shimmered with a hint of yellow underneath. "Good job!" Karmu smiled up at his friend and tightly clasped his hand. His friend had a job that would last several weeks and they would have more than enough money to pay the rent for the room and send more home. Karmu was happy. All was well.

cabin and mouth gaping wide open to show the space between his front teeth. Luckily it was his milk tooth that had been broken by the blow, she told herself for the umpteenth time. Amma lay on the lowest berth, mumbling Quranic verses beneath her breath, loud enough to be intelligible by the ones familiar with them. The bodies on the berths towards the side all had their backs towards her, still and apparently asleep. There was Nasreen at the top, her thick braid with its numerous colourful attachments falling over the side, Meenu in the middle clutching at her mother's dupatta that also accompanied the braid and Zamir, Nasreen's husband on the lowest one. Again she reminded herself to offer to pay him for the journey to Karachi. He, being her brother would refuse the money and think of it as an insult, but in Nasreen's eyes at least, she would be forgiven for this untimely trip down Southern Sindh towards a city none of them had ever seen before. So many people to thank... her childhood friend Shazia for agreeing to let them live in the upper portion of her house, her brother Zamir... She heaved a sigh.

"You had that dream again, didn't you?"

Amma was awake and well, being Amma, she did have the uncanny power to see through her every sound every time.

"Hmm," she replied morosely, gazing down towards her mother's careworn old face that due to its sixty years of hardship looked nearer to ninety years.

"Allah help us all. It is an evil omen." She moved her wrinkled arms thrice in an outward motion as if removing all evil from the world around her and blew in the air on nothing in particular. Then she went back to her mumbling.

It was the same every morning she thought. The dream, Amma's mumbling, the warding off of evil spirits and then even more mumbling. She should be thankful, Amma had told her. Thankful for what, she had almost asked. But girls from their family did not ask questions. They only listened when their elders spoke. Standing up with head bowed in front of the men folk, she had listened, and they had spoken. The colour red, coming together with the brown barren earth was a bad omen for a dream and more so when the dreamer awoke in a sweat and was not fit to talk. It was different if it happened once but having the same dream every night. It was inauspicious and a sign of ill fortune. She must be returned to her home. Her husband had felt differently but the older women of the family had shushed him immediately. Baba knew all. He always did. And when he spoke, his word was law. And he had spoken. She must go. And along with her, that idiot son of hers who looked

glumly at the teacher and insisted to be taught to read, rather than join alphabets to form words. Whoever heard the like? Reading before learning his *alif, bay*? And then beating him daily with the 'cure-all' stick had brought no improvement. He trembled at the sight of the stick but had become more stubborn than ever and despite his seven years, could not read a single word. The woman and her progeny would bring about the family's downfall for sure.

Try as she would, the pain of that day burned into her heart with the shame of it all. She at the end was the outcast woman, the one who had borne an idiot son and would in all possibility bear even more. If only she had had the sense to keep quiet about the dream, if only the master-ji hadn't told her husband that his son was not making any progress at the Sukkur Elementary School, if only he hadn't been born... *Astaghfirullah!* It is the *shaitaan's* doing that I am thinking evil thoughts. She mumbled a few verses of the Quran. Glancing down at the sleeping form of her son she heaved another sigh and tried to go back to sleep, trying not to think of the last copy he had turned in for his school test, blank except for the drawings and scribbles he had made on it. Karachi was as yet almost two hours away. The train started crawling again...

*

The heat of the day was getting to her. May was known as a hot month in Sukkur but at least it wasn't as humid. Here she felt as if she was in the kitchen even when she was outdoors. Karachi was a sea of heads. There seemed to be a crowd of people jostling each other no matter which ward of the hospital she went to. And she was not even certain if she had come to the right place. Her son stood almost disinterested beside her. Zamir had accompanied her till the gate and then had disappeared somewhere in the crowd. She knew he would turn up after his usual dose of cigarettes so she had not tried to look for him.

"Ada, please tell me the way to the brain doctor," she requested a man in uniform. He barely looked at her and pointed towards the end of the road.

"Where?" she asked, still confused.

He looked at her son and holding him by the shoulder, spun him around to face the direction of the road. "Go there. It's OPD 6. First right then second left after going straight on ahead till five blocks, and then turn right again. Ask along the way. Now go," he replied in a voice muffled by the red gooey substance that sprayed forth at intervals when he spoke. As he turned to pick up the mop and pail behind the door of the room where they stood she realized she had been talking to the sweeper.

She opened her mouth to ask him to repeat what he had just said but a touch on her hand stopped her. Her son looked at her and shook his head. Then he started walking, gesturing with his head. He had barely spoken much after his first beating in school when he had come back and sobbed out his sorrow in her lap. He had loved the idea of school when his father had brought him his first school bag – a colourful red one at his insistence. He was six years old then, a cheerful and talkative cherub. His first day at school was a disaster he had come and tearfully told her. The older boys had picked on him as a weaker being and had taken away his lunch money. His father was not pleased when told. “When someone hits you, hit him back. What are you? You’re my son. A strong lad! Be strong.” Then it had become an everyday affair and he had withdrawn from her and the people around him completely. His father supported the school and dubbed him as lazy. Eventually he too had given in to the harsher verdict – that his son was an idiot and would amount to nothing. One day the boy came home with blood trickling down his face and his front tooth in his hand. She had been aghast. The master-ji maintained that the boy had attacked him and it was only in self defence that he had thrust the stick towards him. How was he to know that it would hit his tooth? His father agreed. And after all it was just a milk tooth.

What difference did it make? Plus the boy must learn never to argue with his elders and above all, never to cheat and then lie about it. When she had tried to intervene, the result had been a stinging slap and the pronouncement that it was her excess support that had been his undoing. Later at night she had sneaked into his room and seen with unbelieving eyes the notebook that had been the cause of all this trouble. There outlined in wobbly letters, were all the sums that the master-ji insisted even his best students couldn't solve in one go. She was told that the boy had been cheating from others and copying from the better student who sat next to him. She had flipped the pages and found beautiful drawings. There were trees that looked alive with the wind rustling through their leaves. A mynah with its beak open, bursting into full throated song, while its mate watched hidden behind the boughs of a full grown Neem tree. Allah knew who had drawn these. The master-ji and the boy's father had tried their best to make him draw or write anything in front of them but his hand shook and his gritted teeth spoke of the pressure he felt in trying to do it all and fail every time. How could they then believe him when he said just a single word: 'me', in response to their repeated queries of who had done all the work?

"We're here," the boy said dully, jolting her back to her present surroundings. She looked at him

uncertainly. He never smiled now and his eyes held a distant look. Most of the time she could not understand this boy who was her son. She had barely been able to follow clearly or even remember what the sweeper had said, yet here they were in front of the OPD for the brain doctor and it was her son – her idiot son who had led her.

The doctor was a man in a brilliant white coat, which looked out of place in the grimy surroundings. There was a sea of people around him all clamouring to be seen first and yet he went about his work as calmly as if there was no one else in the room. An orderly waved and pushed people to their right places if they got too near the doctor. The ones in front had the best view and the others at the back gave each other advice to pass the time. At times lasting bonds were built here as mothers shared their common issues, fears and tears. She felt a tug at her *kameez* and looked down to see a tiny child with huge kohl lined eyes and a black *taweez* on his bare chest look up at her and yell 'Ammi'. It took the little one a few moments only to comprehend that she was not his mother and he promptly started bawling loudly. There was a commotion in the crowd as several people were pushed back against each other. A woman swathed in the voluminous folds of an all enveloping *burka* bore down in her direction, scooped the child up with one arm, yelled something behind her to her family in her

mother tongue, smacked the child soundly on the bottom and pushed back to her place.

She adjusted her dupatta again which had somehow slipped down from her head in the midst of the fray and waited for her turn. She was just about to give up when Zamir appeared pulling at his beard in the way he always did when things were not going his way.

"The doctor is busy", she stated the obvious in answer to his questioning look.

He took the slip from her hand and pushed ahead. She could see him arguing with the doctor. Finally he gestured to her to bring her son forward. She took her son by the hand and pulled him through the crowd.

"What is your name, boy?" he was asked. The doctor's piercing gaze seemed to bore into his. He shivered and she rubbed his shoulder.

"It is alright. The doctor won't beat you. Tell him."

"Abid," he muttered, looking at his feet and the doctor had to ask him to say it again.

The doctor asked him a couple of other questions about what he could read or write and what he understood or remembered. She produced the notebook, gesturing Zamir to tell the doctor about it when Abid surprised her by snatching it away. 'No!'

he yelled in a voice suddenly not his own. She tried to explain but he did not seem to be listening for once. His eyes were more intent on the doorway from where two young men in white coats were coming in their direction, their eyes on him. And that was when he bolted for the door. She tried to stop him but he pushed her aside and ran as she had never seen him run. The notebook clutched to his chest with one hand and the other used to shove people aside. She was vaguely aware of Zamir as he ran after her son, the men in white coats who had turned to follow then as abruptly stopped and of the doctor who pressed a white slip on her saying that her son was obviously not normal but it was unfortunate. "Allah's will. Don't blame yourself, bibi. Give him these medicines for strength and come back after fifteen days."

"My son is strong," she had replied. "Will he become normal?" she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

The doctor's few disjointed phrases of trust in Allah, were answer enough. She left the room carried by several hands of pity as the women present patted her shoulder, her back, and murmured more phrases about Allah's will.

*

The rain beat down mercilessly and she was soaked to the skin. Zamir was up on the roof repairing the

parts where the roof had rotted away and she was trying to help him by handing him the plastic sheets they used as their carpet. Makeshift shelters with planks of wood scrap as rooftop material were fodder when the monsoon struck. Abid lay on a charpoy in the corner, his skin burning with fever. Meenu was wiping his face with cloth wrung out in the cool rainwater. Apparently it was doing nothing to keep the fever down. The black taaweez on his bare chest was doing nothing either she reflected. As stony and as unresponsive to her prayers, as the silence of her sister-in-law, it had hung from his neck for over two months now. The day he had run away from the hospital room seemed to be several years ago. The day her husband's family had pushed them out of the door, seemed to be something that had happened to someone else in another life.

She had pinned her hopes on the taaweez Amma had got from a holy woman in the neighbourhood. "Apa, we have seen miracles happen!" her mother was told. She too had been told about the dreams. "Never fear Apa, it is the evil spirits that send these dreams. The power of the taaweez is such that all will be driven away! Don't you worry." Yet the taaweez had done nothing for her boy or the dreams that troubled her nights. Now she was having difficulty sleeping. Often she lay awake dreading the time when sleep would overcome her and she would see the clock again with

its single red burden. The silence and the ticking grew more ominous with each passing night. What did it all mean? Surely it was a negative influence that much she knew. Her whole life had taken a turn for the worse since she was plagued by them...

She was called out of her reverie by her brother who wanted her to hand over more strips of plastic. "Adi, we will have to take him to a doctor. Don't worry," he added, seeing the worried look on her face. "I'll make sure he doesn't run away. In any case he is too weak."

"In any case the brain doctor has said that nothing can be done. He will remain an idiot."

"No, no, don't say that," Zamir's tone was gentle. "Allah can work miracles."

"I have decided brother. As soon as he is rid of this fever, we will go back to Sukkur. Meenu's school is about to start too and Amma misses her neighbourhood. We have tried and failed. Nothing can be done." She handed him the last strip of plastic and went inside quickly, averting her gaze so no one would see her tears.

*

They were back at the same hospital where they had come in a few months earlier with hopes for a cure that was more effective than the cure-all stick. This

time Zamir led the way as she pushed the stretcher on which Abid lay delirious with fever.

Malaria, the doctors had said. Nothing to worry about but all the same, he was weak they said and would need regular checkups. The general ward has beds available Zamir had told her. Why go through the additional hassle of travelling all this way from the other end of the city. "Let us keep him here for a few days," he had insisted and she agreed.

While Abid slept out his fever, the first day she sat by his side reciting the Quran. The ward was a clean enough space with typical hospital smells. Strong soapy smells that nevertheless carried a hint of stench. Nurses came after every few hours to check on his pulse and replace the drips he was being given. The beds all around were occupied. Soon enough she found herself the centre of an interested and responsive audience who all wanted to know what had happened, how it had happened and what would she do now. When she reached the part where Abid had run away with the notebook, her audience let out audible gasps and 'tsks' and punctuated them with appropriate shakes of the head. She hadn't even noticed the two young doctors come in and join the group till they tapped her on the shoulder. "We'd like to see this notebook," said one. "Maybe we can help," said the other. "Have you ever had an IQ test done?"

asked the first one flipping through the pages expertly while the other looked over her shoulder.

She looked from one to the other. "Maybe, I don't know. I got all the tests done that I was asked. Blood test, urine test... all tests. It must be in that file."

She saw the doctors glance at each other. "It's okay. Keep this; we will need to talk to your son and you separately when he feels better."

The talk was a longer process than she expected. The doctors came every day. One would talk to her while the other played games with her son. What good will these games do, she had wondered, yet the smile on her son's face was good enough. At least he seems happy for now. She did not know what to make of the doctors though. They appeared confused to her. They said they were brain doctors but that they would not give her any medicine. Then they added that they would help her find out what level her son was at. "Level?" she had said in disgust. "I know my son is an idiot. What is new in that? Will telling me about levels help in anyway?"

It was Zamir who had calmed her down. "We have tried everything. Now let this be the last test then we can go home. What harm can it do? They are not charging us any money either."

Then the questions began. How was he born, when and why did she feel he is an idiot, who else felt that way, how was he taught and how was he beaten and several other questions about his life that she did not know. As she sat outside the room where they had called him in, she wondered how little she did know her son. She had never thought about which games he liked to play. It was understood that he would go out in the evening to play with other children and return at the call for Maghrib prayers as instructed. Come to think of it she had not seen him play any games. The boys in the neighbourhood would make fun of him and push him away. She was sure he did not have any friends either. Then what did he do outside for all that time?

After what seemed like several hours to her, she was called back inside and Abid was sent to wait outside. It was Zamir who asked the question for her this time.

The doctors smiled. "There is no need for him to be cured because he is not an idiot."

She looked up disbelievingly.

"We were unable to find out his exact level as he isn't old enough and does not know all the things we would have liked to ask him but there is no doubt that he made the drawings himself. He can do sums as well as a Class 5 student and what you have on

your hands may well be a genius – a misunderstood genius and not an idiot.” The words were music to her ears. Yet she could not understand... How had it all escaped their notice? Could the elders be wrong? Master-ji, baba...

The doctors explained. He was a very talented child and exposure to different things would help him become even better but the method of teaching, the frequent beatings had made him stubborn and the unsupportive experiences had made him withdraw. He chose now to be exactly what others thought he was – an idiot. It would be still many more months before he came out of his shell and showed his true self. It would require love, respect and no references to his past self. He had always been a sensitive child she agreed. The doctors were sympathetic. She was fortunate that they had found it out gently from him at this point because a few more years down the road would have made the stubborn child, an angry young man. Private tuitions were a better option, they suggested, till he was ready to join the mainstream schooling system. “You can do it and you will be able to do it soon, should replace the statements of you cannot do it,” she was instructed. Yet she should not force him or push him. He would do it all, but in his own time and pace.

She walked out with Zamir, her head in a whirl and then it came back to her. The dream could not be that wrong could it? The land was barren. The colours were all wrong. She woke up sweating every day. There must be some mistake. Panic stricken she went into the room to see the backdoor open. The backs of the doctors leaving through the corridor were visible as they turned round a corner. She rushed after them. She must ask.

She came upon them just as they were getting into their car. "One last question..." she began and poured out the content of the dream she had been disturbing her at night.

The doctors smiled again. The one nearest to her replied. "Let me ask you a question now. You have been having this dream and believing that it is negative, right?"

She nodded.

"Well, suppose it was a sign or a positive dream then how would you look at it?"

She did not have an answer.

"We are no dream interpreters and even if we were, dreams can have several meanings. It is the one you choose to believe in that may make your life or break it," the doctor continued, "but for once when you

sleep tonight, tell yourself that the rose is actually Abid and the barren land is the environment you have given him, in which he sees no hope. If this helps, good, otherwise come and see us day after tomorrow. Sorry, but we need to leave now.” She stood still for many minutes. The doctors went off leaving her to walk slowly back to where Abid and Zamir stood in the glaring sunlight, underneath the arch of the hospital gateway, waiting for her. Red... rose, school bag, earth, cricket, dust, Abid laughing, Abid crying, blood, tooth... one tooth... There was so much that made up a dream. So much that others did not know. Even Baba... even Amma... even Apa who lived in the neighbourhood. She could feel the tears streaming down her face again but this time feeling no need to avert her face. She hugged Abid tightly.

... The land was as barren as it always was. The red rose visible and quivering in the soft breeze. Each sense seemed intense. The clock dial in the ground tick ticked clearly. She moved forward. Was there any green in the earth? Green was a positive sign she knew. Baba always said... The rust brown sands were shifting, she would fall... but the red rose was still, then what made the sands shift? She held her hands out towards the rose to steady herself. The scene melted away...

Abid watched his mother as she muttered uneasily in her sleep as she always did. Tonight however, he could sense something different. He expected her to wake up, the glass of water was ready in his hands. She never did. Her body twitched slightly, she let out a sigh as she changed her position and slept peacefully again. He waited for awhile, glass in hand but she slept soundly. He switched off the single light in the room, covered her gently with the dupatta she used at night and carefully placed his notebook aside. The ink on the cover still gleamed in the moonlight as it dried. The cover now read 'Abid Shah – Sukkur, Sindh'.

Glossary of terms:

Alif, Bay: Letters of the Urdu alphabet equivalent to A and B.

Amma / Ammi: Mother

Apa: Sister. Term used as a mark of respect for other women who are older but not related.

Astaghfirullah: Words used by Muslims to seek forgiveness from God.

Bibi: Term of respect used to address a lady.

Burka: Full body traditional attire worn by some Muslim women. In some cases this may cover their face as well.

Kameez: A long shirt usually reaching till the knees or lower.

Mynah: Tropical Asian Starlings.

Taweez: A charm or amulet given for the purpose of protection



Pushpa Raj Acharya

Pushpa Raj Acharya has published poems, short stories and articles. He has published a collection of Nepali poems, *Chhaaya Kaal* ("the phantom time") and a collection of English poems *Dream Catcher* (2012). He has translated, among others, Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, Peter Brook and Jean-Claude Carrière's adaptation of Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* and J.M. Synge's *The Riders to the Sea*. He teaches at Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. Currently, he is doing Ph.D. in Comparative Literature Program at University of Alberta, Canada.

At the Hospice

Pushpa R. Acharya

Dark clouds scudded across the sky. The distant hills looked like the black rocks that had burst out from the inner core of the earth. The trees in the surroundings appeared pale and placid, tired of standing all day and all night, or gnawed by some unknown grief.

The bus came to a halt. She tied her hair, took her bag, and get off. At the station, the crowd was thinning out. She strode outside the station and took a taxi.

The taxi stopped in front of the Pearl Garden restaurant. In those days, when they used to go there, it was only a small coffee shop. She asked for a cup of coffee and a piece of cake and sat on a chair just near the door.

She finished her coffee and cake and came out to the road again. The earlier taxi driver had not left the place and was now looking at her. She walked past him. She could feel tiny drops of rain on her face. She

looked at the sky and opened the umbrella. It would rain heavily.

After many years, walking along the same road reminded her of the days when they used to walk here every day. After her wedding, she had not even been in this city. Her husband, once or twice, had proposed to spend the holidays here. But they never managed to come here.

Had the city changed? She could not be sure. She saw many new houses and tall buildings, crowds on the pavements seemed to have increased, and there were more vehicles. The roads were certainly widened. But the small brick houses that used to be on the both sides of the roads had vanished without any trace. She could not see familiar faces. But something inside her strongly insisted that it had not changed at all. One could not say that the city had changed until the essential warmth was exiled from there. Here, she felt the same affection in the air, the same pleasure in rain, and the same passions she used to feel long ago. The essence seemed to have remained same here. It did not happen with many cities. The city she had been living had turned entirely different in these few years. It was isolated and cold despite a huge increase in population and houses. The warmth was gone.

She entered a flower store. She used to come here with him, almost daily, even though they did not buy

flowers. Going to college, parks, or restaurants, or this store was a daily routine. It used to take twenty minutes come here from the college. It was the biggest flower store in the city during those days. The old florist was fond of their visits, and they were subjects of his gossip. His small daughter was very talkative. The young girl sitting at that cash-counter was most probably the same little girl. She bought some blue bells and roses and asked the girl about the old florist. He had died some years back. She also bought some fruits in the next shop. The hospice was a little farther, and it was drizzling outside. She thought of taking a taxi though she would still love to walk and see the place around.

When she arrived at the hospice, she paced forward slowly. She asked about his room at the reception. She went to the upper floor and asked a man standing there. He pointed towards the left and gazed at her with curiosity.

She meekly opened the door and peeped in. It was quiet there. A person stirred on the white bed. There he was. The one she knew for so long and had once loved so dearly. They had not met after his marriage. His eyes were fixed at the door.

It was apparent that he was surprised to see her. She looked at him. He looked thin and pale but his eyes were still bright.

He asked in a feeble voice, "I had thought that you would come."

She smiled. She kept the fruits on the table and gave him flowers. He sat on the bed and held them with both hands.

"How are you? Is he here too?" he asked.

"No, he isn't. I came alone. I'm alive," she was staring at his colorless face to read it, to understand more.

"Last week, he had been here." Her husband had told her about him. He happened to visit this hospice to meet his friend's father.

"Your wife...?"

"She has gone home to bring food. How is your son?"

"He is fine. He's joined the army. I came to know about the accident much later." She said. His daughter was an airhostess who was killed in a plane-crash two years back. She had seen the photo of the girl in the newspaper but did not know it was his daughter.

The room was all white. So was the bed.

"How long have you been here?"

"Many months. But now I don't have more days left. I wish I would be able to finish the book."

"What book?"

"Thoughts on dying."

She kept silent. Nothing but the realization of death could bring absolute silence.

Then, they talked a little about the past and their present. Their hearts were filled with the long gone memories of the youthful days. Her eyes were filled with tears. Then, again, there was silence for several minutes.

"Will you stay today?"

"No, I cannot. I haven't been able to overcome the past. I couldn't forget. Even this city reminds me of you," she nearly fumbled. He had married another girl when their affair was still going on. She did not ask why, and he never explained.

He kept quiet.

She said nothing. There was a vast desert like expansion between them, an expansion of emptiness.

"The next bus is at seven. I'll have to go now."

"I am at peace that you came." He smiled and thanked her.

She smiled back, bid him farewell and left.

He got up from the bed, washed an apple she had bought and ate it. He smelled the fragrance of flowers, switched off the fan and slept. The fan stopped after a while. Outside, it was raining heavily.

When his wife came in, she saw a bouquet of the bluebells and roses on his bosom. He was lying on the bed so serenely that an unknown fear seized her, and she ran quickly to his bed.

Olena's Diary

Pushpa R. Acharya

We were returning from the theater. Strindberg's "The Ghost Sonata" had drawn a curtain of silence between us. Poisoned by the beauty of illusion, or by what appeared to be so real, we kept on walking almost in a trance.

It was a cold winter evening. The streetlamps appeared as if dangling on thin strings. They emitted orange light that flooded the pavement and the pedestrians, the road and the cars, the houses and the bare trees, everything, and us. We could not but trust the visions floating around us once the eyes had caved in the perimeters of darkness and light.

"Shall we go tomorrow?" She asked.

"Perhaps," I said.

I was not sure if I wanted to see the other play. Strindberg had thrown me into the vast ephemeral space between quietness and dreams. They would

show five more plays at the Studio Theater in university. The next one was a Havel.

She lived in an apartment at the university residence.

"I'll ready the dinner. You can read those stories," she said.

During the Fall, she had been in the northern villages of Nepal for two months. She got interested in the stories that the villagers had told her. She had indexed the medicinal plants of the region for her research and written down some of those tales. She wanted me to read them.

It was warm inside. She had a deck of tarot cards on the table.

"Do you read tarots?" I was about to touch the deck, and she stopped me.

"You can't touch them. And, I'm not going to read for you," she said.

"Why?"

She just smiled.

"I'll give you the stories. You won't be disturbed."

And, she handed me a grayish diary and went to kitchen. I sat down on a chair.

I had taught her Nepali language for three months before she went to Nepal. I doubt it was sufficient for her to understand those stories. She had mentioned about a local school teacher who occasionally worked as her interpreter.

There were eighteen stories, written in her curvy, spidery, small handwriting, in black ink. This was how the stories had travelled to this far away country in the northern hemisphere.

None of them had a title. I started reading the second last story.

"He will come back!"

Their hope was still alive.

Decades had passed, but they still waited. The craggy cliffs, the windy gorges, and the mighty river, the bright blue sky, and the small clusters of houses—everything participated in the villagers' waiting.

The story began in the monastery. It was in the northern side of the village.

In the monastery grew a child learning about the path from the monks. He had a faint memory of his parents, who had left him there. He knew the things that the monks taught him or the experiences that he

underwent in a deep meditation. For attaining the virtuous knowledge, he practiced meditation and healing, read holy texts, and followed a strict ascetic life. The old monk had prophesized that this young monk would accumulate great merit and help many people. By the age of twenty four, he had completed a silent retreat of three years.

Then, during a festival, the old monk introduced him to the villagers. A bright, tall, radiant, young monk who looked calm and peaceful. He was greeted with smiles and alms.

After two years, the old monk left the monastery and went to the mountains for a solitary retreat. Soon after, an epidemic swept the area. Fifty people died in three weeks. The monks travelled from a village to another and stayed with people. The young monk, with his medicines, cured many others. His smiles and powerful eyes would always radiate mystical aura. People felt as if he could understand their being. Many people believed that it was his good virtue that defeated the disease. After a few days life was normal again.

But something had changed in the monastery. There was no peace in his room: He was restless. He went to the temple, stared at the colossal statue of the Buddha. He saw the yellow flames leaping up from the small lamps—the burning flames of fire, the

power that can raze and that can generate. He was disturbed, and his head was heavy. Not knowing what else to do, he sat down for meditation.

At that moment he heard the footsteps. He saw the same girl coming in and experienced the extreme joy and pain at the same time. And, he trembled a little. Whenever he visited the village, she always appeared around. She used to come to the monastery every morning before the sunrise. Last week, early in the morning, he saw her bathing in the river. He thought that the girl was the cause of his restlessness, and now she was in the monastery. This was the moment he did not want to face.

She stepped forward, and he lowered his eyes. He felt like a helpless prisoner ready for a punishment. He spoke out, "Why have you come here?" She said nothing, just looked down and stood there. Her silence seemed to be unbearable, and a sudden surge of anger enraptured him. He scolded her and said that she was an evil seductress, the one sent by *Mara*. The girl just said that she liked him, and it was a sin to love a monk like an ordinary man, so she came to ask for forgiveness. His anger was renewing itself with more vehemence. He kept on scorning her. She listened quietly, with a great pain and suffering in her heart. She said she came there for repentance, but in

anger and confusion, he told her that there was no repentance for her.

She left the monastery with a great distress. He sat down for meditation. Late in the evening, he was called upon for a funeral.

There he saw a body lying dead on the ground. It was the same girl that he had scolded in the morning before the sunrise. The villagers told him that she slipped her steps while climbing a tree for grass and fell on the rock below. He remembered her tearful eyes and his harsh words. He requested the other monks to complete her last rites.

After a couple of days, the villagers came to know that the young monk had abandoned the monastery and gone to the mountains for meditation. There were two young boys who said they had seen him going northward. Nobody ever heard of him after that day.

Sometimes light flooded the top of the mountain. On such days, the villagers used to say, "He will return from the mountain."

I saw Olena staring at me from kitchen. I was deeply engrossed. She was trying to read my expressions. I looked at her with a smile.

"I'm almost done. Just a few more minutes," she said.

I could smell the soup that she was preparing. Then, I started reading another story in the notebook.

Some young men were here from the neighboring houses. I found these gatherings in the evenings interesting because people would talk about different things. I sat with the women and children. The youngest kid of my landlady was sleepy, but she wanted to sit with me. It was the second month I had been in this village, and after three days I would be returning to my country. I knew many of the people around. After all it was a small village, and the people were so friendly.

They asked me about my people and country. I told them that my father migrated from Eastern Europe when he was young, and in the new country, he worked in a factory to raise his family. He used to be a farmer and shepherd when he was in Ukraine. Then, a young man of the neighborhood commented that a shepherd's life was hard and dangerous. When I asked why, he recounted this story.

"It happened some eight months ago. This shepherd boy was called Budhe—he was called thus because he was born on Wednesday. He was young, just nineteen, and strong, loyal and truthful. He lived in

the northern jungles taking care of a large flock of sheep, three dogs and the land owned by a rich man in the other village. It was, no doubt, a hard life. But he hadn't yet realized it to be so. In the company of sheep and dogs, he had learned to live in solitude.

"One afternoon, while he was playing the flute, he saw a girl coming towards him. For a moment, it seemed as if he had enchanted her with his music. He stopped playing the flute and looked at her eccentric eyes. He knew that no girls lived around there, and it would take a whole day to come from village. There were four other shepherds nearby, and that was all.

"She told him that she lived with her father, further north near the small lake. He told her that he had visited the lake but never noticed any human habitation. She replied that it had just been a month since they settled there. They had to abandon their village in the west as her father was suffering from the feasts of madness. They were ostracized. So they decided to stay away from the villages. Then she told that she was wandering around to see the place, noticed the sheep and goats and heard the soothing music. She requested him to play it again, listened attentively, admired his skills and disappeared in the forest.

"Everything was strange, but her beauty had charmed him. She would visit him daily for a short time and go

back. After a week or so, he waited for her to come, and if she did not, he would feel depressed. Gradually, he found her more and more beautiful. Her beauty, odor, voice became his obsession. Well, this is like fire and butter, as we say in the village. She was all fire, and he was melting.

"After a few months, it led to their meeting under the moonlit sky. She would come in the evening and return early in the morning. He felt every night was filled with divine energy and love. Those were the timeless moments for him. He concluded that it was for her, only her, whom he had longed for years.

"One day she said that it was not possible for her to continue her secret meeting. Her father would disapprove of everything, if he came to know of it. So, she wanted to get married. They decided to talk with their families or friends.

"She did not come to visit him for a couple of days. The third afternoon, he went to visit other shepherds and told them that he was thinking of getting married. They all asked him who the girl was and where he met her and everything. He told them everything and called them to come to his hut in the evening for food and drink.

"As he was preparing food for his friends, she arrived. He was happy to see her. She said that her father was

not feeling well, so could not come earlier. But she had told him about her desire to marry Budhe and he consented on the condition that they had to stay in the forest. She told him not to tell anyone about their affair until they got married.

"The shepherd told that he had already informed his friends about it, and they would be visiting his place later in the evening and requested her to stay there. She looked worried and opposed the idea. Then, she told that she would not meet them until she got married and left the place.

"Before the fall of the darkness, the shepherd's friends arrived. One after another the wine cups were emptied and refilled. The mysterious rays of the moon beamed in the sky. There was a blend of happiness and eeriness all around them. Far in the forest, the foxes and jackals were howling. In reply, the dogs continuously barked raising their head towards the sky. Below the moon and the stars, the shepherds' merriment continued until midnight. Finally, they all thanked him, sang a love song and departed.

"He went inside the thatch and slept. In dream, he saw that she kissed him.

"The following afternoon, a fellow shepherd came back looking for his cap that he had forgotten. He

called his friend but heard no reply. He first found his cap, and saw Budhe still on bed. When went near him, Budhe was dead—cold, white and bloodless. He called the other shepherds.

"After the funeral, they tried to find the girl. There was no sign of anybody living near the lake, and nobody had heard of a father and a daughter in the neighboring villages."

When he finished the story, I asked them what had happened. They had some supernatural explanations.

I was amused. I praised Olena for what she had written.

She asked me about the stories I had picked up for reading. I had read the last two stories. She said nothing.

While having the dinner, we talked about the play. We concluded the character of the lady in dark clothes was very strong in the performance.

At around 10:30 p.m., I left her place.

I had to walk three blocks to go to my apartment. There were some people returning from library. I had Olena's diary with me.

When I came in my room, I just flipped the pages of the diary before keeping it on the table. I noticed that a page somewhere in the middle of the diary had a single sentence which read like an epigraph:

I saw the pale kings and princes too, Pale warriors, death-pale were they all.

I slept thinking if Olena's had written the stories in certain order.

In the works of Arbab Daud from Pakistan and Ibrahim Waheed from Maldives, stories like "Jack in the box", "Banana Patch girl" and "Piece of Peace" there is no fantasy tale. These are progressive stories in spirit and tone. In fact these are good examples of realism. In others there are dark and humorous tales about human misery. We are living in post Cold War world, where economics dominates emotions. Which is why it becomes all the more challenging for prose and verse artists like Ayesha, Arbab, Ibrahim, Kiran and Pushpa to map out the joy and sorrow, passion and rage, cry for freedom and justice of suffering souls in literature. Peace and hope are twin weapons in imaginations of these short story writers. Not only are they bubbling with boundless optimism but they are also armed with countless fables and parables of real lives cluttered with ambition and aspiration. I am confident; *"After the Rain"* is a whiff of fresh air in Literature today. Stories are written in more accessible style and are based on some personal experiences. This is the hallmark of constructing a realistic prose in narrative fiction. In one story of Ayesha, "Mischievous is my middle name" one can see a glimpse of French story teller Guy de Maupassant's easy greasy style, especially illustrated in the prose of his famous work, "L'Inutile Beauté" (The Useless Beauty).

Frank Huzur



Fraternity of Literature & Culture

